

The Characteristics of One Who Forgives

Scripture: Philemon 4-7

Code: 57-2

For our study this morning, I draw your attention back to the wonderful little book of Philemon. Turn in your Bible, if you will, to Philemon. It is sandwiched neatly in between Titus and Hebrews, the book of Philemon. This morning our text from Philemon is taken from verses 4 through 7. We are in a four-part series entitled, "A Lesson in Forgiveness" and this morning is part two. Let me read you verses 4 through 7 as the setting for our message.

"I thank my God 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."

We live, obviously, in a society that knows little about forgiveness. We live in a society that cares little about forgiveness. In fact, I would think that one of the major contributors – if not *the* major contributor – to the destruction of relationships in our culture is the absence of forgiveness. Our culture pushes us to be unforgiving. It celebrates and exalts people who are not willing to forgive. We make heroes out of the Dirty Harry's and the Rambo's who murder people out of vengeance.

As a result of the sinfulness, the wickedness, and the lack of any kind of Christian social restraint in our culture, we have a society filled with bitterness, filled with vengeance, filled with anger, filled with hate, filled with hostility toward others. This can be seen in the retaliatory kind of crimes that become so commonplace in our day. It can be seen in the suits, lawsuits against everyone for everything conceivable and inconceivable. In fact, it is frightening to think about the fact there are more people in law school today than in all other professional graduate schools combined. We are going to proliferate an almost endless number of attorneys to take care of an endless number of lawsuits as people retaliate back and forth for every minuscule and major issue of life that has been foisted upon them.

Even counselors today are telling us it's not healthy to forgive. That's a new one. There is a new popular book written by Susan Forward and it is titled *Toxic Parents*. The thesis of the book is really the prevailing attitude of our present-day culture and that is it has a negative attitude toward forgiveness. There's one chapter in the book entitled, "You Don't Have To Forgive." In other words, you are a victim of some toxic parents who poisoned you and until you put the blame on them where

it belongs, you're not going to be a healthy person. We live in a retaliating, vengeful, hostile, angry culture that wants to make everybody else the perpetrator of a crime against us and us, frankly, responsible for nothing except vengeance. Certainly ours is the most hostile, the most angry, the most unforgiving, the most vengeful culture that I have ever experienced in my brief lifetime.

Now, for a Christian, the failure to forgive is unthinkable. I don't care what the issue is, I don't care what the offense is, a failure to forgive is a blatant, open act of disobedience. We have been told as explicitly as we could possibly be told that if anybody offends us we are to forgive them. How many times? Seventy times seven or, that is, an endless number of times. And that the reason we are to forgive is because our Father in heaven has forgiven us and will continue to forgive us as we are faithful to forgive others.

To look at this issue from the negative side for a moment, if we buy into this culture – a culture that says you don't have to forgive, you have a right to your pound of flesh, you can sue anybody and everybody for anything and everything, you ought to blame somebody else for your responsibility and make sure they pay painfully for what they've done to you – if we buy into that mentality, here's what it'll produce: I'll give you just four things that will happen in a life of a Christian. Number one, it will imprison you in your past. A failure to forgive will imprison you in your past. As long as you fail to forgive an offender, an offense committed against you, you are shackled to the past. Unforgiveness keeps that pain alive. Unforgiveness keeps that sore open. Unforgiveness never lets that wound heal, and you go through life reminding yourself of what was done to you and so you feed that open wound, you feed that open sore, you stir up that pain, and you cumulatively build up a larger and larger degree of anger. You go through life accumulating bad feelings.

Now, think about it. What's the point of that? What virtue does that give or render? Unforgiveness just imprisons you in the past, and for all the time that you go back to the past and regurgitate that unforgiving attitude, you will accumulate in your life the tragedy of anger and hostility escalated, built on, accumulated, piled up, which will rob you of the joy of living. You will go through life feeling just as bad as you do now or worse – with no relief in sight. On the other hand, forgiveness opens the door and lets the prisoner out. Forgiveness sets you free from your past. As soon as you forgive it, it's gone, you're free. If you insist on remembering the offense and never forgiving it, then you allow the person to go on offending you the rest of your life. And it's your fault, not theirs.

Secondly, unforgiveness not only makes you a prisoner to your own past but unforgiveness produces bitterness. It produces bitterness. The cumulative effect of remembering without forgiveness some offense done against you, no matter how brief the time or long the time, is that you become a bitter person. The longer you remember the offense, the more data you accumulate on it, the more recited memory you have for it, the more it occupies your thinking, and the more it occupies your thinking, the more it basically shapes your person. Bitterness is not just a sin, it is an infection, and it will infect your whole life. And bitterness can be directly traced to the failure to forgive. It makes you become

caustic, it makes you become sarcastic, it makes you condemning, it gives you a nasty disposition, harassed by the memories of what you can't forgive, your thoughts become malignant toward others, you get a distorted view of life and you have literally diseased your whole existence. Anger begins to rage in you and it can easily get out of control. Your emotions begin to run wild. Your mind becomes the victim of that. You entertain continuing thoughts of revenge. And what happens? Even casual conversation becomes a forum for slander, a forum for gossip, a forum for innuendo against the offender, and your flesh, that horrible remnant of your old self, has gained control.

I suppose this happens most notably and most frequently in marriages. Two Christians married to one another should never be divorced, they should never be separated, and they should enjoy a happy relationship. That's by God's design. Now, when I got married I married a sinner. What is even more unthinkable is, so did my wife. And the fact of the matter is that it is an utter impossibility for us not to offend each other. It doesn't just happen now and then through the year, it happens quite regularly. But where forgiveness operates, an offense is one moment in time, come and gone. Where there is no forgiveness for that, there is the accumulated bitterness that begins to turn you against your own partner, that makes you caustic and sarcastic. You shut off your affection, you shut off your kindness. You look for ways to get back, and the bitterness results in the devastation of the relationship. Forgiveness, on the other hand, dispels bitterness and replaces it with love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control. Why would anybody want to live in the prison of their past? Why would anybody want to live with accumulated bitterness that makes them violate every relationship?

There's a third thing that unforgiveness does. Unforgiveness gives Satan an open door. Unforgiveness throws the welcome mat out and invites the demons in. Where you have unresolved anger, where you have unresolved bitterness, where you have an unforgiving spirit, you have given place to the devil. Ephesians 4:26 and 27 says, "In your anger do not sin, do not let the sun go down while you're still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." The point is, if you go to bed at night and you haven't fully forgiven so that your anger is gone, you will give Satan a foothold. In 2 Corinthians chapter 2, there is a very direct statement made by the apostle Paul. In chapter 2 verse 10, he says: "I forgive." "I forgive" – in verse 11 – "in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan for we are not ignorant of his schemes." The devil moves in to an unforgiving heart, to an unforgiving life.

It is no exaggeration to say – listen carefully. It is no exaggeration to say that most – *most* of the ground that Satan gains in our lives is due to unforgiveness. We're not ignorant of his scheme to move in on an unforgiving attitude and destroy relationships. And frankly, you can evict all the demonic trespassers by an act of forgiveness. Why would anybody want to be in prison to their past? Why would anybody want to have the disease of bitterness to skew and discolor their life? And why would anybody want to throw the door and put out the welcome mat for demons?

Fourthly, unforgiveness hinders your fellowship with God. Unforgiveness hinders your fellowship with God. Jesus said if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. In the ongoing relationship with God, if we don't forgive others, He doesn't forgive us. So if I'm not right with you, then I'm not right with Him. Why would I sentence myself to being anything less than in the place of maximum blessing from God, right? What kind of foolishness is that? How idiotic can I be? Do I find some value in having God angry with me? Is there some virtue in cutting off the purity and the joy of my fellowship with God?

You see the idiocy, don't you, of an unforgiving attitude? It makes you a prisoner of your past, it gives you the all-pervasive disease of bitterness, it opens the door for demons, and it alienates you from the full, rich fellowship that God desires to have with you. There is plenty of good reason, then, to be a forgiving person. If you refuse to forgive others, you forfeit fellowship with God. You open yourself to Satanic involvement. You pollute your life and steal its joy. And you make yourself a victim of your own past.

This matter of forgiveness, because of its significance and importance, then, is dealt with at great length in Scripture. There are, in fact, at least 75 different word pictures in the Bible about forgiveness. There are at least 75 word pictures about forgiveness in the Bible. And they're all there to help us grasp the importance or the character, the nature, the effect, something about forgiveness. Let me just give you a few of the biblical word pictures about forgiveness.

To forgive is to turn the key, open the cell door, and let the prisoner out. To forgive is to write in large letters across a debt "nothing owed." To forgive is to pound the gavel in a courtroom and say "not guilty." To forgive is to shoot an arrow so high and so far that it can never be found again. To forgive is to bundle up all the garbage and all the trash and dispose of it, leaving the house clean and fresh. To forgive is to loose the moorings of a ship and release it to the open sea. To forgive is to grant a full pardon to a condemned criminal. To forgive is to relax a stranglehold on a wrestling opponent and give him his life. To forgive is to sandblast a wall of graffiti, leaving it looking like new. To forgive is to smash a clay pot into a thousand pieces so that it can never be put together again. This matter of forgiveness is very important, and it's right at the very crux of your spiritual health and mine.

Now, because it is so essential, the Holy Spirit has devoted one entire book of the Bible to forgiveness – not a very long book, but one book, the book of Philemon. Here in this little book of just 25 verses is the spiritual duty to forgive emphasized, not in principle form, not in parable form, not in word picture form but in a personal true story. Now, you remember the story, don't you? A man named Philemon lived in Colossae. He was married to a lady named Apphia and they had a son, Archippus, who was in the Christian ministry. They had a house. He must have been a fairly wealthy man and in his house, the church met. They had a slave. The slave was named Onesimus. Even though Philemon was a good master, Onesimus wanted his freedom, so one day he ran away. His

master had paid a very high price for him; this was fraud. Not only that, he stole some things from his master and took them with him. And so he had committed a felony criminal offense for which imprisonment or even death could be the just sentence.

Onesimus ran from the little tiny town of Colossae to get lost in the massive humanity in the city of Rome, thinking he could hide in the underground of Rome as another of the faceless runaways, the homeless street people who occupied the back alleys of that great city. But it wasn't long – we don't know exactly how long – until this runaway slave came face-to-face with a very formidable man by the name of Paul. So here is the runaway slave Onesimus, he is confronted by Paul. Paul has the privilege of leading him to Jesus Christ. He becomes a Christian. Paul, of course, then finds out that Onesimus is from his friend Philemon, that he belongs there, that he has run away. And even though Onesimus is a Christian and helpful to Paul, Paul knows he has to send him back. And so he sends Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter explaining what has happened. And in the letter he is saying, "I want you to forgive this runaway slave."

Society says don't forgive him, society says press charges against him and imprison him, society says make him pay back every dime he stole and then wasted in Rome, society says put on him the stigma of *fugitivus*, the runaway slave, and brand his forehead with a big "F" so the rest of his life he is scarred as a runaway slave, not trustworthy. But Paul says just forgive him. Just forgive him. No matter how much it costs you, you forgive him. The plea of this letter, then, is a plea for forgiveness. Now, as the letter unfolds, it becomes apparent that Paul is asking Philemon to forgive a man who is repentant. Onesimus has done his part; he is repentant. He is coming back, as it were, hat in hand, asking for forgiveness. God has done the right work in his heart and now it is the turn of Philemon.

Now, last week we looked at the first three verses, which was the introduction, and I kind of laid out the importance of the story. This morning we're looking at verses 4 to 7, the second section in these four sections, and this section deals with one of the three main thrusts. Verses 4 to 7 give the spiritual character of one who forgives. Verses 8 to 18, the spiritual action of one who forgives. Verses 19 to 25, the spiritual motivation of one who forgives. So we learn a lot about a forgiver here. We learn how to be a forgiver. We learn the principles of forgiveness, and that is the intention of the Holy Spirit in writing this wonderful letter.

Now, for this morning, we're looking at verses 4 to 7, the spiritual character of one who forgives. I don't want you to get lost, so I want you to listen to what I say. If you read verses 4 to 7, you're not going to necessarily see Paul identify, one, two, three, four, five, six, the principles of a forgiving person, but you're going to see them come out in what he says. They're not, what we say, explicit but they are implicit. They're implied here – very, very clearly. In this section, Paul refers to Philemon in very, very glowing terms. He commends him from verse 4 through 7 on his Christian character. And as he does that, he is describing the kind of man who will be a forgiver. This is the spiritual character of a man who will be a forgiver. So in effect, he's saying, "Philemon, I know you're the kind of man

that I can trust to forgive Onesimus.” He’s really setting him up by reminding him of his own character. I mean it’s part of wisdom, isn’t it, to deal out praise whenever and wherever it is possible? For praise itself becomes a nourishing food for virtue.

Did you understand that? Praise itself, legitimate praise, becomes a nourishing food for virtue and a strong antidote against sin. If someone comes to you and says, “I want to tell you, I look at your life and I just thank God that you’re a godly, virtuous, holy Christian.” Believe me, that’s food that nurtures virtue. And at the same time, that’s an antidote against sin, isn’t it? Because if you know people see you that way and believe you’re that way, that accelerates your desire for virtue and your desire to stay away from vice. And so Paul speaks of the great virtue of the character of Philemon as the foundation for his appeal to forgive. “I know you have the kind of character that will forgive.” Now, what kind of character is this? Well, we see it in verses 4 through 7.

Here, as Paul gives this wonderful, warm kind of exposure to the character of Philemon, we see the kind of person who forgives. Now, he says so many good things about him you have to ask the question: How did he know all this? One, they were acquainted personally. They knew each other. In fact, in verse 1, he calls Philemon “our beloved,” our *agapetos*, our loved one and our *sunergos*, our fellow worker. So they worked together, they loved each other. I told you last week Paul had led Philemon to Christ. He knew about the man. Furthermore, the church at Colossae met in his house, so a lot of Christians knew about him. One of those Christians was the leader of the church at Colossae, a man by the name of Epaphras, and Epaphras, according to verse 23 of Philemon, was with Paul in Rome. So whatever Paul knew about him, Epaphras could have enhanced because Epaphras was the leader of the church in Philemon’s house. And then there was Onesimus, the runaway slave, he must have affirmed all of this. He didn’t run away because Philemon was a bad man, an evil master, a hard-driving forceful kind of taskmaster – not at all. Everybody would have affirmed the character of the man, and so Paul had good knowledge of the man’s virtue.

Now, as we look at these verses, verses 4 and following, we’re going to see the kind of person who forgives. What kind of person has the capacity to forgive? Let’s look at verse 4 and start there. “I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers.” Now, we’ll just comment on that very briefly. He says – in effect what he’s saying is: “Every time I pray about you, it is with thanksgiving,” that’s what he’s saying. “Always in my making mention of you in my prayers, I thank my God.” That would be another way to frame it up. “Always when you come up in my prayers, I express my thanks, always. I mean I don’t have anything other to say to God than thank You for Philemon. I don’t know any negatives about you. Everything I’ve ever heard about you and everything I’ve ever experienced with you is good.”

Furthermore, verse 5, “Because I hear.” Literally, I continue to hear. “The word keeps coming to me, Philemon, about you that makes me pray for you and in my prayers I just say thanks.” Paul is saying, “I pray and in my prayers, you come up, and every time you come up, I thank God for you because

every time I hear something, it's positive." What a wonderful statement. "All the news about you, Philemon, is good." There's nothing in this letter to correct Philemon. There's nothing in this letter to suggest that he was out of line. There's nothing to suggest that he had an error in his theology, that something wasn't right in his home, something wasn't right in his marriage. I mean everything just was as it should be in this man's life. So he says, "Everything I know about you makes me say thanks to God for you."

And what did he hear? And what did he know about him? Several things. Number one, he had a concern for the Lord. He had a concern for the Lord. Please note the first thing is in verse 5. He says, "Because I hear" – follow me now – "of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus." That's the phrase I want you to grab first. "The first thing I hear about you is that you have a true faith in the Lord Jesus, you have a concern for the Lord. I know I can come to you, Philemon, and ask you to forgive because you are concerned about the Lord, you have a true saving faith, you're a genuine, real Christian and therefore, you have the ability to forgive. You have been forgiven, so you can forgive. You have the impulses of the new life. You have the prompting of the indwelling Holy Spirit. You experience the conviction of the Word of God. You are a true believer, and a true believer desires to do what is right and what honors the Lord, and so I can appeal to you to forgive because you're concerned about the Lord."

By the way, that verb "you have" – present tense. "You continue to have an ongoing continuous nature of concern toward the Lord. You have continuing trust toward the Lord Jesus. You have unwavering faith. You are a faithful, true, genuine believer. He says, "Philemon, you walk by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. You exhibit trust in Him in everything. You seek His Will. I know you can forgive." You see, we are those for whom much has been forgiven and we can forgive much. We are those, you remember, of whom Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 that we are to forgive one another because God for Christ's sake has forgiven us. We are those, like the parable of Matthew 18, who have been forgiven an unpayable debt and should go out and forgive others. "Philemon, you have a real faith, you're a true believer, you can forgive." And what he's really saying here is that the first characteristic of a forgiver is he's a Christian. He has a concern for the Lord.

The contrast for that is back in Romans 3. Just very briefly, I call your attention to Romans 3:10. Here the apostle Paul describes a non-Christian, an unbeliever. In verse 10, he says here's the basic description of the nature, the character, the disposition of a non-believer. "There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have become useless, there is none who does good, there is not even one." So the first thing he says about an unbeliever is they're just not good, they're bad, wicked, sinful, unrighteous, can't do anything good. Even their good is bad good because even what they do that may be humanly good is motivated by their own pride, not the glory of God, so it's bad good. So I have told you in the past, unbelievers can only do bad bad, or bad good. It's all bad.

Then in verse 13, he talks about relationships. “Their throat is an open grave.” In other words, when they open their mouth, out comes filth and stench and rottenness. “Their tongues are used to deceive. Their lips are filled with the poison of asps. Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood.” Now, there’s a description of unregenerate people. You open their mouth and out comes filth. On their tongue, deception. On their lips – moving from the inside to the out – on their lips, the poison of a snake. Out of their mouth, cursing and bitterness. And you give them a chance, if they catch you, they’ll kill you. There’s no forgiveness there. That’s the bitterness and the vengeance and the anger and the hate and the hostility of unregenerate people. They are driven by hate. They are driven by bitterness. They’ll curse you out of their bitterness. They’ll kill you if they get a chance. On the other hand, those who have been reconciled to God and those who – as Paul says of Philemon – have faith toward the Lord Jesus, are prepared to forgive – and only those.

It doesn’t surprise me that our society is so litigious that we sue each other. It doesn’t surprise me that people kill each other. It doesn’t surprise me that if you pull in front of somebody on the freeway, they’ll pull alongside of you and make obscene gestures at you, if not shoot you. It doesn’t surprise me that the hostility and anger of our culture is what is because that’s in the human heart, and we have moved so far away from any kind of Christian aura of Christian social restraint that that now is tolerated – more than tolerated, advocated. That’s because that’s the way unbelievers should be expected to act. That isn’t surprising. Sometimes what does surprise me is when somebody pulls up beside me and does that and then speeds on by, and I notice a fish sticker on the back bumper. And I figure it’s a Christian car but not a Christian driver.

Those who are reconciled to the Lord Jesus Christ, however, forgive because we have the capacity to forgive. This world is ripped to shreds everywhere from marriages to nations because people can’t forgive. Only Christians can really forgive from the heart, as Jesus said it. Only Christians can really forgive from the heart. So a forgiving person has a concern for the Lord. He is very concerned for the Lord. He loves the Lord, wants to honor the Lord, is desirous of that which expresses his faith in the Lord. And because his faith is real he has the capacity to forgive. He has a new nature, he’s a new creation, the indwelling Spirit gives him that ability.

Second, a forgiving person also has a concern for people. A concern for people. Verse 5, Paul says, “I hear also of your love which you have toward all the saints.” Now, you’ll notice that I’ve kind of explained that verse and it’s a little bit jumbled up. This is in the Greek language, what we call a chiasmic arrangement. In other words, the words and the thoughts in the verse are arranged in a crisscross fashion. And the first expression – “I hear of your love” – goes with the last expression. And the second expression of faith goes with the first expression toward our Lord Jesus. So you have to look at it as a crisscross, that’s chiasmic in the Greek language. So when he says “faith,” he’s talking about the “faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus”; when he says “love,” he says the “love which you have toward all the saints.” That’s the second characteristic. “You love the saints.”

This is agape love, this is love of choice, love of the Will, love of self-sacrifice, love of humility, this is the love that says I don't care about myself, I care about you. This is the love that says I'll make any sacrifice to meet your need. This is the love that says it's not emotion with me, it's obedience. I'm not compelled to serve you because there's something about you that's attractive, I'm compelled to serve you because there's something about the power of God within me that moves me that way. This is what Paul said in Galatians 5:6 as faith working through love. You remember 1 Thessalonians 4:9? Paul says, "I don't have to teach you how to love; you're taught by God to love." Romans 5, "The love of Christ is shed abroad in your heart." First John 3:14, he simply says, "If you're born again, you love the brothers. If you don't love the brothers, you're not born again." In other words, you're a Christian, you have a capacity to love. You have the love of God shed abroad in your heart. You've been taught by God to love. You've been given the capacity. It's there. It's the love of the Spirit that's in you.

And so he says to Philemon, "I know you can be a forgiver. Why? Your faith is real, so you have a concern for the Lord. Your love is real, so you have a concern for the people." You cannot ask an unbeliever to forgive. They don't have any love toward people. They don't have any passion, self-sacrificing, love of Will to do what is right toward someone as something innate within them. If it's self-serving, they'll do it. And the love they know about is the love of feeling and the love of emotion, not the love of choice and the love of commitment. So he says, "Philemon, you're a forgiver because you have a concern for the Lord, you know God, you walk with Christ, your faith is toward Him and it's continuing, and you have a love for the people."

Thirdly, one who is a forgiver has a concern for fellowship. A concern for fellowship. He says, "I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus Christ and toward all the saints that the fellowship of your faith may become effective." Now, here he adds another concept. He is saying "you have true saving faith, you have true spiritual love, and you have a desire for fellowship. Your faith pursues fellowship." He calls it the fellowship of your faith. And he says, "I'm hoping that the fellowship of your faith may become effective." That's the word "powerful." Powerful. "I know you care about the fellowship." Now, that's true of Christians. If you're a Christian, you care about the fellowship. You care about the body of Christ, is what he's saying. You're concerned about others. You say, "Look, I want to forgive you because I don't want chaos in the fellowship. I want harmony, I want peace, I want unity."

There's no individualism that says, "I really don't care about you, I'm going to take what I want and I'm going to ask what I want and I'm going to give only what I want and I'll do things my way because I'm the one that I care about." No, a Christian doesn't say that. A Christian says, "I care about the fellowship, I care about you, I care about our unity, I care about our ministry, I care about our mutual sharing." The word fellowship, *koinnia*, is a hard word to translate, actually. It most often is translated "fellowship" but when we talk about fellowship, we usually mean enjoying somebody's company. We say we had fellowship together, we mean we just had fun or we talked or we had a little bit of time

together and sort of shared a little bit of kibitzing or a little bit of food or refreshment or – but that’s not what we’re talking about here. What we’re talking about here is belonging – that’s the word that I like best, belonging. You belong to somebody else and somebody else belongs to you in a mutual partnership.

So he says, “I know that your faith is concerned with how important is this mutual belonging.” And what’s his implication here? Well, Onesimus is coming back. You know now that Onesimus, from reading this letter, is a Christian. And that makes him in the fellowship and he belongs to you now not only as a slave but as a brother in Christ and you belong to him not only as a master but as a brother in Christ and “I know you care about the belonging.” That’s the idea. “I know that’s important to you.” And then he says, “And I want your fellowship, the fellowship of your faith, to become effective, to have a powerful impact.” And what he’s saying is, “If you forgive this guy, it’s going to have a powerful impact.” Because this was a serious felony for which the slave could lose his life, and if you just flat forgive the guy, that’s going to send a strong message to the church about the priority of belonging. This man now belongs to me not as my slave but as my brother and my brother needs forgiveness. That’s going to be a powerful statement of fellowship. Doesn’t matter what a man does to you or what a woman does to you, if you can take that person back and embrace that person in love, you have made a strong statement about your concern for fellowship, have you not? For the mutual belonging. You’re not concerned about you and your isolation and your individualism; you’re concerned about the partnership, the mutual participation.

So a person with true, saving faith is concerned about the Lord. A person who has had the love of God shed abroad in his heart is concerned about other people. And a person who cares about the fellowship and has the priority of the mutual belonging of believers in his mind is going to be the kind of person eager to forgive. If you love the Lord, if you love people, if you love the fellowship, you’ll be a forgiver.

There’s a fourth, a fourth concern, and that is this: He had a concern for knowledge. Paul wanted him to be reminded of this, so Paul says in verse 6, “I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become powerful through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you” – stop at that point – “through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you.” Now, let me ask you a question. When you became a Christian, did God put good things in you? Yes, you’ve been blessed with – what? All spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus. Do you know you have a new creation in you? Do you know there are a lot of good things in you? Many good things. And he says to Philemon, “Philemon, I want you to have the knowledge of every good thing in you.” So how do I learn them? How do I know about the good things that are in me? Do I read about them in a book? No. The word for knowledge is *epignosis*, not just knowing, *gnosis*, but *epignosis*, deep knowledge, rich knowledge, full knowledge – listen to this – experiential knowledge. It’s the knowledge through personal acquaintance with truth. It’s the knowledge that comes through experience.

Now, listen to what he's saying to him. He's saying, "Philemon, if you forgive this guy" – listen now. "If you forgive this guy, you're going to immediately experience the good thing in you called forgiveness. You could read about forgiveness in a book, but you wouldn't really know it because you haven't experienced it. You could hear somebody preach about forgiveness and how wonderful it is and how blessed it is, but you really wouldn't know it until you did it. You know how to get the knowledge of the good things that are in you? Exercise them. You find out the tremendous goodness of what God has placed within you when you walk in obedience to the Will of God and you do things and you see and experience those things in your own life. God has given you the capacity to forgive. Forgive somebody and experience it." That's what he's saying. "Once you do it, Philemon, you're going to experience the forgiveness."

I mean we've all sat down and read the books that showed some guy skiing down the Swiss Alps on a sunny day and the snow flying by and the beauty and wonder of all of that and the thrill and exhilaration. But I'll tell you, there is a lot of difference between looking at the picture in the book and coming down the mountain. There's a certain one-dimensional, flat knowledge that you get out of the book that cannot even be related to what you experience when you're flying down the mountain on the skis. And the same thing is true in the spiritual realm. I can read the flat words on the pages of the Bible that define forgiveness, but I will never have the *epignosis* or the deep knowledge of forgiveness until I – what? Forgive and experience it. And that's how I learn to know every good thing that God has put in me.

So the person who can forgive is concerned about the Lord. He's concerned about people. He's concerned about fellowship and he's concerned about knowledge. He wants the full, rich, deep knowledge of every good thing that's in him. You know, just follow that through. I want to do what God wants me to do because I want to experience the power of the goodness that is in me through Him. It's not my own goodness, but it's the goodness that He's put in me. Don't you get a joy out of that? Sometimes when we have the opportunity to give, for example, and to give generously and to give sacrificially, we feel this thrill, this exhilaration, this joy, this exuberance, because we have experienced the deep, rich goodness that God has put in us that causes us to be able to give sacrificially. And so he is reminding Philemon – and us – of the priority of being concerned about knowledge.

There's a fifth component, I think, in the character of someone who forgives and that is a concern for glory – a concern for glory. At the end of verse 6 is this little phrase, "For Christ's sake." Actually in the Greek it says, "Unto Christ." Unto Christ. In other words, he is saying, "Philemon, I know you have fellowship as a priority. I want it to be powerful. I know you're concerned about knowledge and I want it to be the knowledge of every good thing that is in you, and I know you want all of this for Christ's sake." That's implied. In other words, you're concerned about the glory of Christ. You do it unto Him, as unto Him. The Christian life, with all its deeds, with all its joys, with all its works, with all its

responsibilities, is for the glory of Christ. It's for Christ's sake, it's for Christ's name, it's for Christ's praise, Christ's glory. And frankly, if you're devoted to that, you're going to forgive, right?

I can't say in one moment, "I want to do all to the glory of Christ but don't think I'll forgive you." You can't say that. Be honest. What you have to say is, "I'm not going to forgive you, so, Christ, I'm not interested in Your glory; I'm interested in my vengeance." That's what you're saying. But if you want to honor Christ, then you'll forgive as He forgave you, right? If you want to honor Christ, you'll obey what He told you to do. Surely Philemon was concerned to glorify Christ. Surely he would do it unto Christ or for Christ's sake. The one who forgives, then, is marked by a concern for the Lord, a concern for people, a concern for fellowship, a concern for deep experiential knowledge, and a concern for the glory of his Lord.

There's one last note. The person who forgives is characterized by a concern to be a blessing. He's characterized by a concern to be a blessing. And this again is implied. Verse 7, Paul says, "I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love." Stop there at this point. This man had a reputation for love, and Paul says, "Your love has brought me joy and comfort." That's what he says. Not just joy and comfort, much joy and comfort. "I have come to the point where you have given me reason to rejoice. I have come to the point where you have encouraged my heart by your love." In what way? Verse 7, again, middle of the verse, "Because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." What a statement. The hearts – he uses the word *splanchna*, actually the bowels, the feelings, the seat of emotion and feeling. He says, "People in trouble, people with feelings, people suffering and hurting and struggling have found you to be a blessing. You refreshed them." It's a military term used for an army that takes a march, stops and rests. "You bring people rest. You're a peacemaker. You renew people. Your care and your service and your refreshing heart brings solace to troubled folks."

Nothing indicates that he was an elder in the church. Nothing indicates that he was a deacon in the church. Nothing indicates that he was a teacher in the church. Obviously, he was some kind of businessman. He was not a calculated diplomat. He was just a man of instinctive kindness. He was a blessing to everybody. That kind of person will forgive, the person who is concerned to be a refreshing person. "I don't want to bring trouble in your life, I don't want to make unrest, I don't want to bring disturbance, I want to bring rest."

Listen, those are the kind of people that bring me joy. There are people in my world, believe me, there are people – more than I would like to think about – who bring me trouble. And it's usually fairly constant. And you look long and hard to find those who just refresh you all the time because they resolve everything, because they bring peace to everything, because they exercise wise direction and leadership, because they serve and care and minister and because they just bless everybody. Those are the kind of people who are going to forgive because all they want to be is a blessing.

Well, Philemon by now has got to be saying to himself, "Boy, I'm quite something – wow." And that's exactly what Paul hopes he's saying because in verse 8, he's going to hit him between the eyes with what he needs to do. And now he's going to feel so good about what a wonderful man he is, he's going to have to do or he won't live up to his press releases. Anybody who loves the Lord Jesus Christ, anybody who loves the saints, anybody who loves the fellowship, anybody who loves true knowledge, anybody who loves the glory of Christ, anybody who loves to be a blessing is going to be a forgiver. That's the character of the kind of people who forgive. And so Paul establishes that character as the character of Philemon. And then, as we shall see next Sunday, asks him to forgive.

I was reading through an old poetry book that's a favorite of mine. And I came across a poem – and I don't know if it will affect you the way it did me. Maybe because I'm a father of four children and have such wonderful and cherished memories about my children, it struck me and even made me very emotional. And every time I've read it, I've had the same kind of response. But it's just a little reminder of the simple qualities of forgiveness. See if you can follow what the poet says.

"My little son who looked from thoughtful eyes
and moved and spoke in quiet grown-up wise,
having my law the seventh time disobeyed
I struck him and dismissed with hard words and unkissed.
His mother, who was patient, being dead.
Then fearing lest his grief should hinder sleep,
I visited his bed but found him slumbering deep
with darkened eyelids and their lashes yet from his late sobbing, wet.
And I with moan kissing away his tears left others of my own.
For on a table drawn beside his head he had put within his reach
a box of colors and a red-veined stone, a piece of glass abraded by the beach,
and six or seven shells, a bottle of bluebells,
and two French copper coins to comfort his sad heart.
So when that night I prayed to God, I wept and said:
Ah, when at last we lie with tranquil breath now seeing thee in death,
and thou rememberest of what toys we made our simple joys,
how weakly understood Thy great commanded good.
Then, fatherly, not less than I whom thou hast molded from the clay, thou leave thy wrath and say, 'I forgive thy childishness.'"

If God can do that for us, can't we do that for each other?

Father, thank You for this reminder this morning of the kind of person who forgives. We want to be that kind of person. We long to be that kind of person. We find no virtue in being any less than that.

And so we ask that Your Spirit would make us like dear Philemon, those who have the character of a forgiver. If there's anything that we have yet unforgiven in our lives, resolve it this moment and free us from the bondage of the past, the disease of bitterness, the open door to Satan, and the forfeiture of sweet fellowship with you, for only forgiveness can do that, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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