

## **The Actions of One Who Forgives**

Scripture: Philemon 8-18

Code: 57-3

This morning in our study of God's Word together we return to the letter of Paul to Philemon, the epistle to Philemon. This brief epistle of 25 short verses, one chapter, is a living lesson on forgiveness. And this is our third out of four looks at this little epistle, and we again this morning will sit at the feet of Paul and learn how to forgive. You remember the first three verses gave us the introduction. Then, verses 4-7 showed us the characteristics of someone who forgives. And now in verses 8 through 18, we come to the action of forgiveness itself. We're going to be looking at the very issue of forgiveness. To put in your minds just a little bit of review in case you've forgotten or are new with us. Philemon was a Christian layman living in the city of Colossae and in his home the church at Colossae met. He had been led to Christ by Paul. His wife was Apphia; his son, Archippus.

They had a slave by the name of Onesimus. Onesimus ran away. He was a fugitive, a runaway slave. He wanted his freedom. He ended up in Rome. And when he was in Rome, somehow by God's providence, he ran into the apostle Paul. Paul was a prisoner in a house there, a rented house, and able to do some ministry. And somehow this runaway slave, Onesimus, was led to Paul, and Paul led him to Christ. Now, he sends him back to his owner, Philemon, with this letter asking Philemon to forgive him for his defection, for his defrauding, and for whatever he might owe Philemon, having stolen things when he left. So, it is a call to a man to forgive one who has sinned against him, namely this runaway slave Onesimus.

The theme of this little book is forgiveness. Interestingly enough, the word is never mentioned here. It's almost as if the Holy Spirit made this a fill-in-the-blank epistle. It's all over the place, but yet never stated as forgiveness, and yet that is clearly to the reader what it's all about. Another curiosity of this book is the fact that there are no doctrinal principles given that would provide the foundation for forgiveness. You would assume that no less a theologian as the apostle Paul in calling a man to forgiveness would want to give him the theology of forgiveness, or the biblical principles that make forgiveness a mandate, a requirement, or a command. But, you don't find them here. In fact, as you go through this epistle, there is nothing said in terms of principle about forgiveness. The appeal, quite on the contrary, is not to law or principle, or theology or biblical texts, but the appeal is to love. He takes the high ground. He knows that Philemon is a godly man. He knows he is a spiritual man. He knows he is a man whose heart toward God is right. And so, he makes no appeal to law but he makes an appeal to love, which again I say is the high ground.

Now, we must assume that Philemon knew the theology of forgiveness. We must assume that Philemon knew the principles on which forgiveness is built, the biblical doctrines that lead us to forgiveness. He must have known them. It's obvious that he was grounded in the knowledge of the Word. However, much as I wish I could, I can't make that same assumption about all of you. I could appeal to the high ground of love, but I'm not sure that all of you understand the theology of forgiveness that lies beneath that appeal. And so, I think it might be good for us for just a brief part of our discussion this morning to lay down some foundational elements of forgiveness that rise out of the Scripture that compel us to forgive, from the standpoint of God's authoritative Word. Let me give you seven keys, or seven elements, or seven features of a theological, doctrinal, biblical defense for forgiveness.

Number one, it is not murder alone which is forbidden by the sixth commandment, but a lack of forgiveness. It is not murder alone which is forbidden by the sixth commandment but a lack of forgiveness. The sixth command, "Thou shalt not kill." But that is just a very thin statement that needs much more content to fill it up. And for that content, we have to only remember Matthew chapter 5 and the words of Jesus Himself who said this, "You have heard that the ancients were told, You shall not commit murder and whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca;" which is a term of derision, "shall be guilty before the supreme court and whoever shall say you fool shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell." In other words, Jesus said when God said you shall not kill, He also meant you shall not hate, you shall not hold malice, you shall not be angry, you shall not carry wrath, you shall not have a desire for revenge, you shall not seek vengeance, you shall not exhibit a lack of forgiveness. God also forbids that. The theology of forgiveness then really begins with the Decalogue, or the Ten Commandments. We are not only not to kill, but we are not to entertain any of the kind of emotions that ultimately end up in taking someone's life as the extreme end.

Now, how can I dispossess myself of some of these attitudes of anger, and hostility, and unforgiveness, and revenge? Well, in the first place, see the one that you won't forgive as the creation of God. In other words, love that person and forgive him for that of God which is in him. For every one of us who is created in the image of God, though that image is scarred and marred, if I look at a believer who is a Christian, he is therefore holy, and he bears something of the moral image of God. And I can forgive him for that which is of God in him. If I look at an unbeliever who is unholy, he still bears the natural image of God and I can forgive him for that of God which is in him. It could replace my anger and my lack of forgiveness with reverence, if I can see the image of God in someone.

Furthermore, Jesus said love your neighbor as yourself. Certainly, you seek to see the image of God in you, don't you? Don't you find yourself eminently worthy of forgiveness? Don't you find it hard to understand why anybody else wouldn't forgive you? You are certainly eager to forgive yourself,

against yourself you bear no grudge, against yourself you exact no penalties, against yourself you carry no vengeance. And if you do no sin against yourself and you hold it against yourself, it is not a desire for destruction, but a desire for blessing: the recovery that you seek. So, you must, first of all, realize that any hatred, any kind of lack of forgiveness is a violation of the command to not kill because it underlies that attitude of murder that would take the life of someone if it could and get away with it, or it would inflict harm on them if it could.

Furthermore, if you were to deal with this attitude you must recognize that your lack of forgiveness is, plain and simple, selfish. You have to deal with your selfishness. It is exactly that undeserved affection for yourself that makes you aggravate the faults of others who offend you. I'll say it again. It is an undeserved affection for yourself that makes you aggravate the faults of others who offend you. On the other hand, if you are humble, and unselfish, and self-denying, you will see yourself as such a lowly person that no offense against you could be considered significant. A proud self-esteeming ego is easily angered and usually unforgiving because it thinks so highly of itself and then so hatefully of anyone who offends this glorious entity. So, you just can't not kill, God says, you must hate, you must not be angry, and you must not be unforgiving. And if you are unforgiving, you manifest selfishness, you fail to see in others the image of God and you indeed violate the sixth commandment.

Let me give you a second theological foundation for forgiveness. Whoever has offended you has offended God greater. Whoever has offended you has offended God greater. And if God, the most holy, has forgiven him the greater sin, can you, the least holy, forgive him the lesser sin? Do you understand that? David, who sinned against Bathsheba, who sinned against her husband Uriah, who sinned against his own wife, his own children, his own nation, David who sinned against all those people said in Psalm 51, "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned." In other words, he knew that no matter what offense he gave to men, he gave a greater offense to God. And if God can forgive the greater offense, then why can't you forgive the lesser offense? That's the point. That is the inexplicable issue in the parable of Matthew 18 where the king forgives the man the unpayable debt, and then the man won't forgive another man a very simple debt but strangles him and throws him into prison. And the point is: how in the world can you see God forgive the greater offense and you not forgive the lesser? Any crime against you is a greater crime against God. Anytime someone sins against you, it may offend you; it offends God more. Why? He's more holy than you are. Sin is more sinful to Him. It is more offensive to Him. The same offense may be a serious thing to you; it is a far more serious thing to an infinitely holy God. Yet God mercifully forgives. Are you more just? Are you more holy? Are you a higher court with a higher law? The truth is, if you don't forgive, you're not like God at all; you're more like the devil.

Don't forget, you have much to be forgiven by God, and there's no comparison between other men's offenses against you and your offenses against God, either in number, in seriousness, or in consequences. No man could ever offend you the way you offend God, and God forgives you. Can you not forgive others? You deserve damnation from God and so do I, but He gives us mercy for all

our transgressions. Are you going to spend your life seeking revenge for the little petty injuries that have come against you? What is the theology of forgiveness? Remember this: God forbids anger, hate, and unforgiveness. Not just murder. Remember this, He is most offended and He forgives, and you being least offended should forgive.

Principle number three, very important: you will not enjoy forgiveness from God if you don't forgive others. We have noted that in Matthew chapter 6 verses 14 and 15 where God says if you forgive others their trespasses, your Father will forgive you yours. If you do not forgive others, He will not forgive you. In other words, in the sense of our relationship to God, we will stand before God with unforgiven sin under His chastening if we do not forgive others. That is a high price to pay for a lack of forgiveness. If you refuse to forgive someone else, then God refuses to forgive you, and you are cut off from meaningful communion with God, and you are brought under chastening.

Number four, you will not enjoy the love of the brethren if you don't forgive. You will not enjoy the love of the brethren if you do not forgive. In other words, you will never be able to participate in the joyous communion, and fellowship, and love of Christian believers if you don't forgive. Do you remember that parable in Matthew 18? Do you remember the man went out and strangled this guy and he said, I want all you owe me, and he wouldn't pay him so he threw him in prison till he paid everything he owed? Here was a man that God had forgiven but he wouldn't forgive a friend. In verse 31 of Matthew 18 it says, "And all of that man's friends went to the lord and told the lord what that man had done and said, Lord, you have to deal with that man." What is that? I'll tell you what it is. Your Christian friends seeing you with an attitude that is unforgiving going to God and saying, "God, You've got to discipline that person." There is really a picture of church discipline. The saints collecting before God and saying, "God, carry out some discipline in that person's life." You'll destroy your own relationships with other Christians, who will then have to go to God and ask Him to deal with you in terms of discipline and chastening if you don't forgive. If you don't forgive, they'll be unforgiving, and they'll ask God to deal with you. And so you'll not only lose communion with God, but you'll lose the sweet, encouraging, loving, affirming support of other believers who see you as a threat to the purity of the church, and go to God to have your life changed or to get you thrown out. Listen, the theology of forgiveness runs like this: God forbids the attitude of unforgiveness as much as murder. He is most offended and yet He forgives so you being least offended should forgive. You will not enjoy communion with God flowing out of forgiveness if you don't forgive others, nor will you enjoy the sweet communion and love of Christians.

Number five, a very important element in understanding forgiveness: if you won't forgive and rather seek revenge, you have usurped the authority of God. You have usurped the authority of God. In Paul's letter to the Romans in that wonderful practical 12th chapter, listen to what he says in verses 14 and 19, "Bless those who persecute you, bless and curse not." Then, this, verse 19, "Never take your own revenge," beloved, "but leave room for the wrath of God for it is written, Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Leave vengeance to God. When you won't forgive someone, when you

carry around that attitude of anger and bitterness and hostility, you are presuming literally to take the sword of divine judgment out of God's hand and use it yourself. You're saying, "God, give me that sword, I'm taking over." Such an attitude says: I must be the avenger because God is unjust, or God is slow, or God is indifferent, or God just doesn't understand, He's ignorant, or God is unable to judge, and that is all blasphemy.

God is far better able to deal with any offense against you than you. He is able to deal with the consequence of sin far better than you. He has the truest understanding of the issue. You are limited in understanding. He has the highest authority; you have none. He is impartial and just; you are selfishly partial. He is omniscient and eternal, sees the end of everything; you are short-sighted, ignorant, seeing nothing beyond the moment. He is wise and good and all He does has perfectly righteous purposes; you are ignorant and blinded by your anger and your purposes may be evil. It makes no sense for any person to be so blasphemous as to take the sword out of God's hand and wield it himself or herself.

Number six, very important point: the absence of forgiveness makes you unfit for worship. The absence of forgiveness makes you unfit for worship. Again in the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew chapter 5, our Lord said, "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go your way, first be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your offering." Don't you dare worship me if you are not fully reconciled to your Christian brother. You can't draw near to God in such a frame of mind of unforgiveness. You're unfit for fellowship with God's people. You're unfit for fellowship with God. You're in a situation of aggravated sin, you can't be a blessing to others, and you can't be acceptable to God. You see, the biblical theology for forgiveness then involves understanding that God forbids unforgiveness just like murder. That He, though most offended, still forgives and so should you. That if you will not forgive you forfeit communion with Him and you forfeit the love of the brethren. If you do not forgive and feel you have to bring your own retribution, you then usurp the very vengeance of God, an act of blasphemy, and you have made yourself unfit for worship.

Finally, very important: your injuries and offenses, the injuries and offenses against you, are your trials and temptations. That is so important. You have to recognize that whenever something happens to you that is an offense or a sin against you, that is a trial and/or temptation, and you have to deal with it as such. Again, back in Matthew 5:44 Jesus said, "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven." If you want to be truly Christian, if you want to truly manifest your sonship, if you want to be truly and distinctively Christian, then no matter what anybody does to you, you forgive them and you love them. Every time somebody offends you, that is a trial or a temptation. If you pass it and you forgive them, it is a trial producing strength. If you fail it and you are not forgiving, it is a temptation producing sin. Your events, the events that come to you in life go either way. A right response makes it a trial that

produces righteousness; a wrong response makes it a temptation that produces unrighteousness. The only concern you want to have about anybody's action against you is to be sure that you don't fall into sin being tempted by that offense. You must be little concerned about the actions of others against you, whatever they are, and greatly concerned whether they become tests that make you strong or temptations that make you sinful.

Now, we assume that Philemon knew all this because Paul doesn't give it to him. Surely the theology of forgiveness was known to Philemon. And so, Paul leaves it unsaid and I've said it for those of you who needed to hear it. Now, let's go back to the text.

Having understood all of that, Paul rather than building his case on a reaffirmation of that theological ground work takes the high ground and appeals to love knowing that Philemon knows this to be the foundation, doctrinally. Verses 8 and 9, "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." He says, "Look, I could command you, I have enough confidence in my commission in Christ," is what he means, "I have enough boldness, I have enough courage as an apostle directly commissioned by the resurrected Christ to command you to forgive based upon the theology of forgiveness that it is mandated by God. I have the divine right to command you, I have no lack of courage to use that divine right because it is in Christ given me in my commission, and so I could demand that you do what is proper or literally what is fitting in the Lord, what is distinctively Christian, namely that you forgive." "Yet," verse 9 he says, "for love's sake I rather appeal to you." I'm taking the high ground.

Paul loved Philemon. Back in verse 1 he calls him *agaptos*, beloved. In verse 7 he says, "I've come to have much joy and comfort in your love." There was a bond of love between these two men. There was no need to command. You remember Jesus said that if you want to keep the law, do this, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself, on this hangs all the law and the prophets? Paul said: in this is the whole law fulfilled, love fulfills the whole law. "Love is the fulfilling of the law," he says in Romans 13. Love is the high ground when someone possesses true godly virtuous Spirit-given love. That is the high ground: beyond the law and the demand and the command it compels one to do what is right. And while forgiveness is mandatory in the Scripture, and while it could have been commanded by apostolic authority, Paul knows the man to whom he speaks is a man who is motivated by love. He's not talking to a sinning brother who is in the flesh. He's talking to a spiritually minded mature godly man and love will move his heart. So, the reference to Paul's authority is placed there just for Philemon to look at it and take a glimpse, and then it's pulled back. A little reminder that he could use it if he wanted to, but then he says I'm just asking you for love's sake.

And then in order to tenderize Philemon's heart, because this is a tough scene, he throws in two statements about himself. "Do this for love's sake," he says, "since I am such a person as Paul the

aged and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” To get the heart of Philemon, Paul wants to use some sympathetic communication. He says, will you do this for poor me? He’s just really pulling at his heart strings here. And he speaks of himself in two sort of pathetic ways intending to tenderize Philemon. After all, this is a pretty interesting spot to find Philemon. As he’s reading down here like you and I are today and he’s reading down through verse 8, he is there in his house reading this brief letter. And looking right in front of him, he can see Onesimus, the runaway slave, who defrauded him. And all the emotion that he has been feeling from the time Onesimus first left and all the intervening time is welling up in his heart, he really doesn’t know what’s going on. Here is Tychicus whom he knows, he’s got the epistle to the Colossians in his hands to read to the whole church, but here is Onesimus, this guy that has elicited out of his heart all kinds of hostility and temptations to anger that he’s had to deal with, and he’s back and he’s looking him eyeball to eyeball, and he doesn’t quite understand what is going on. And he’s feeling emotion that might make him want to take Onesimus and beat him, or imprison him. And so, the apostle Paul says I’m just going to ask you to forgive him for love’s sake, and would you please do that because the request is coming from Paul the aged who is a prisoner?

He just wants to pull a little sympathy. The word aged just means that, *presbuts*, aged. He was not that old, I mean, 60. But in those days people didn’t live longer than that very often. John the Apostle lived longer than that, but that was rare. People’s life span was shorter then. In fact, he may not have been very much older than Philemon because Philemon was old enough to have a son in the ministry. But, the word “aged” carries more with it than just years in the case of Paul; it carries with it the idea of an aging process that no doubt had been accelerated by the experiences of Paul. You can be sure that the years that had accumulated on the back of Paul were heavier than the years that had accumulated on the back of Philemon. There may not have been a big time span, but there was a span in the aging process. Paul was older than his years. Back in Acts 7 when he was standing there watching them stone Stephen, it says he was a young man; he’s not a young man anymore. He’s old and he’s older than his years because he’s endured so much imprisonment, terrible food, illnesses, travels, persecutions, work, bodily injuries. He said I bear in my body the marks of Christ’s scars all over his body from stones that crushed out his breath from whips and rods, and everything else, and stocks that he had been kept prisoner in. All the painful strenuous debilitating experience that was crammed into those years made him Paul the aged, and this tender glimpse is meant to pluck the heart strings of Philemon, and make him feel sympathy for this old warrior, and thus excite love for the sacrificial apostle who led him to Christ.

And if that weren’t enough to elicit sympathy, Paul rattles his chains again and says, “And I’m also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” Never a prisoner of Rome in his mind, always of Christ Jesus, captive for Christ. Acts 28 says he was a prisoner in a rented house, he has people coming and going, he’s chained probably to a Roman soldier. And he’s saying, “Philemon, can you dare refuse a request from poor old me?” And what is the request? What action is he to take?

Starting in verse 10, we get into the nitty-gritty, if you will, of forgiveness. And there are three actions that one who forgives must take. Three things are involved in forgiveness. First of all, reception. What do I mean by that? Well, the first element in forgiveness is just to open up your life and take the person back. Let him in your life. Verse 10, "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." Just take him back, he says. I'm just appealing to you, take him back. And this should be done immediately because there are three things that are now true about Onesimus. You ready for them? He is repentant, he is transformed, and he is proven faithful. He is repentant, he is transformed, and he is proven faithful. They unfold in those very simple verses.

He's saying you need to take him back because he's ready to be taken back. And forgiveness begins with reception personally. Close the gap. Cross the rift. Heal the wound. Let Onesimus back into your life. I appeal to you, he says, for my child. Like you, Philemon, I led him to Christ. He's my son in the faith like Timothy, like Titus, like others. And the scene is very dramatic, for there stands Onesimus. This is a shock to Philemon, 'cause he's come back with Tychicus and he's come back with this incredible experience with the apostle Paul. And Paul says take him back, he is come in repentance.

You say, "Where's the repentance?" Verse 10, "I appeal to you for my child whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus." It's implied. How do you know he repented? Because he's there, folks, he's there. He went back. He did the most dangerous thing. He went back humble, repentant to face the man he had wronged, the man who had the right of power over his life to exact punishment. He went back. That's repentance. You don't have to say the word; you just have to do the deed. Remember what John the Baptist said to the Pharisees and the scribes? He says: why don't you show me the fruits of repentance? Not just talk about it. Here's the fruit. He went back. Very dangerous, could have cost him his life. But he did what was right. He says, "I appeal to you for this one who stands before you who I have begotten, I'm the human instrument of his salvation by the grace of God, he is now my child, he came to Christ here in my imprisonment and I'm sending him back, open your arms." He's repentant. Obviously or he wouldn't be there. He's humble. He seeks to have a restored relationship with this man whom he has wronged. That is the first element of forgiveness, the reception of the person back into one's life. Open up, kill the hostility, embrace the person.

Second, not only was he repentant but he had been transformed. Look at verse 11. He says you're not getting the same one back that you lost. "Who formerly was useless to you but now is useful both to you and to me." He's not the same guy. By the way, this is a play on words. Onesimus means "useful." It was a common name for slaves, probably started as a nickname. They just nicknamed their slaves useful. And they probably had nicknamed some slaves useless, 'cause those two words



in the Greek are very similar. So, depending on how good they were they nicknamed them useful or useless. Onesimus means useful. So, Paul does a little play on words in verse 11, he says "Useful formerly was useless but now is useful, both to you and to me." Why? God's changed him, he's not the same man, he's different. A radical change has taken place. He's going to serve you the way Colossians 3:22 and 23, the letter he'll read a little later, would say, "Not with eye service as men pleasers but serving the Lord from the heart." He's coming back a different servant. He's not going to serve you just watching to see if you're looking and if you're looking he'll work. He's going to serve you as if he were serving the Lord. He's a transformed man. And he is now useful. he's living up to his name to you and to me. I've seen his usefulness and you'll see it too.

There's a third element that indicates that he was worthy to be received into relationship and that is he was not only repentant and transformed, but he was proven faithful. Verse 12, Paul says I've sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart. This guy's proven. I mean, me sending him to you is very painful. I sent him back with Tychicus because I knew it was right. He had to be restored, there had to be the reconciliation of the relationship, he had to be received by you, it had to be made right, but I just have to tell you, I'm sending him back and it's cutting out my heart. This guy can be loved.

The apostle Paul had an immense capacity to love and he had come to the point where he loved this man. Sending my heart, the word "heart" is actually bowels, the lower part where we feel. The Hebrews always referred to that as the seat of emotion and feeling. And he says my feeling runs deep for this fugitive, this criminal Phrygian slave has become beloved to me. I've opened my arms and I've taken him in and I'm telling you he is a great man to know and love, and in sending him to you I'm cutting out my heart. So, he says take him back, he's repentant, take him back he's changed, take him back he's worthy, he's valuable, he's a wonderful friend, open your heart for him, take him back. He says in verse 13, "Whom I wish to keep with me." I wanted to keep him. That's why it's like cutting out my heart to send him.

And listen to this subtle little note, "that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel." What does he mean by that? It's another way to affirm the gracious loving character of Philemon. He says, "Oh Philemon, I'm sending him back and it's cutting out my heart. I wanted to keep him so that he could minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel in your place. I know you would want to be here to minister, I know your heart of love, I know you wish you could be here and I thought well I'll just keep Onesimus and that will be just like having you here and he'll minister to me where you're unable to do that. I know you would have wanted me to have some ministry and I know you would have done it yourself if you could have, so I thought, well I'll just keep him here and he can minister to me in your stead because I know you'd love to do that." But he says, "Look," verse 14, "without your consent, I didn't want to do anything. I know you would have loved to leave him here to help me in my imprisonment," and he rattles his chains for the fourth time just to keep the heart of Philemon tender. "I know you would have wanted him to stay but I wouldn't do that without your

consent that your goodness should not be, as it were, by compulsion but of your own free will.” I didn’t want you to be good because you didn’t have a choice; I wanted you to be good because you had a choice. I didn’t want to do anything against your will; I don’t want to force the issue. I know you’re a wonderful guy, and I know you wanted to serve me, and you would have done it yourself, and you probably would have given me Onesimus to do it, but I don’t want to presume on your love and I want you to make the choice to be good on your own free will. More than that, Paul wanted him to see the transformation, the repentance and the value of Onesimus.

Beloved, this is where forgiveness starts. It starts in opening up my life and letting the person back in. It starts with forgetting the grudges, and forgetting the offenses, and just opening my life and letting them in and saying, “Yes, if you’re sorry I take you in. Yes, I can see that you’re not the same person you were that did that. Yes, you have value and I acknowledge it.” The person that you forgive, who is not repentant, you can never bring into this relationship. And so forgiveness is very one-dimensional. But where there is repentance and change and value, you take them back.

Now, that leads to a second element. The first one is reception. The second one is restoration. Paul suggests that not only should you open your arms and take him back because he’s worth loving, but you need to put him back into service. You need to put him back into function and ministry. Verse 15, this is fascinating, “For perhaps,” and here he appeals to the providence of God, “perhaps Onesimus 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.” What a statement. Paul says, “Look, I’m not going to mitigate the guilt of Onesimus. Obviously what Onesimus did was wrong, but I just want you to consider that maybe God had a purpose.” And Paul says, perhaps because no man can see the secret providence of God at work. But don’t you think, Philemon, that maybe God was using this evil to produce good? Remember Genesis 50:20? You meant it for evil but God meant it for good. Romans 8:28, all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to His purpose. Psalm 76:10, God makes the wrath of men to praise Him. God can overturn, overrule any evil. God is always triumphing over sin by His providential power and His providential grace. He takes the infinite contingencies and decisions of all of humanity and uses them to accomplish His own purpose.

And so Paul says, don’t you think perhaps that God had planned all along that when this man left you he would come back in another way? He parted from you for a while that you should have him back forever. You lost a slave and you gained a brother. You lost a slave, you gained a brother. God allowed it. God overruled it. A temporary separation to lead to an eternal relationship.

What Onesimus did could have had irreparable damage in terms of the trust of Philemon. But he needed to see that God was working in this, and God had led that man right to Paul, got him converted and sent him right back. And now, verse 16, he says, no longer merely a slave. It doesn’t mean he’s not to be a slave; this isn’t an emancipation proclamation. He’s saying he’s not any longer

merely a slave; he's more than a slave. He comes back a beloved brother. So, take him back, yes to be a servant again, yes to be a slave, but not just that, more than that. He said he's already been that, verse 16, especially to me, but how much more to you both in the flesh, that's as a physical slave, and in the Lord as a brother in Christ? You get him on both counts. Paul is not abolishing slavery. He says he comes back as a servant, he comes back as a slave, but he's not just a slave. You lost merely a slave; you got back a more faithful slave who will operate to the glory of the Lord, and you got back a beloved brother in Christ. How much more will he be to you, Paul says, than he was to me? To me he was only, in the Lord a brother, to you he is in the flesh a servant and in the Lord a brother. You get his physical service; you get his spiritual service in the fullness. Forgiveness means I open my heart; I take the person in relationally. It means I take him in in terms of restoration to service. Reception, that's personal. Restoration, to usefulness and service.

Thirdly, the third component in a forgiving relation is restitution. There has been wrong done, and that wrong needs to be dealt with. How will it be dealt with? Obviously, when Onesimus bolted the place he defrauded Philemon. If the price of a good servant was 500 denarii, he would have to go take 500 denarii which could be a normal common wage, 500 days wages, and buy himself another servant which means it cost him dearly. Not only that, it seems apparent that when Onesimus left, he took some of the possessions and money of Philemon in order to fund his fugitive life. And so, he has definitely defrauded him. The Bible has very straight-forward principles of restitution. You can read about them, for example, in Numbers chapter 5 verses 6 through 8, it tells about it. It was to be repaid. And so, there has to be restitution. How is Paul going to deal with this? Onesimus has nothing. Like the prodigal son, he wasted all his substance on riotous living and then he didn't get a job, he just served the apostle Paul, which is understandable because of his new found faith and the longings of his heart to be around that godly man. He probably comes back with empty pockets. So, how is he going to deal with restitution? Verses 17 and 18, "If then you regard me a partner, a *koinnon*, a fellow partaker of spiritual life, if you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me." Oh my. He says just treat him the way you'd treat me. I want Onesimus to have my righteousness in your eyes. Welcome him as you would welcome me. Forgive him as you would forgive me. Hold an obligation against him as you would hold an obligation against me. Just take him back just the way you'd take me.

And then in verse 18, Paul adds. "But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account." Restitution is always an essential component of forgiveness. It would have been right for Philemon to say, you'll pay me back what it cost me to replace you. I'll take it out of your wages. You will work overtime and you will restore back to me what you stole from me when you left. That would be justice, that would not be wrong. But neither is it wrong to be gracious. Neither is it wrong to say I know you were an ungodly sinful man and I understand that behavior suited that kind of nature. Now that you're a transformed person I no longer hold you responsible for that which you did in your unredeemed status. I graciously forgive you. That would have been a wonderful thing to do, and certainly would have been a Christian high ground approach to the issue.

But just to take any pressure at all off Philemon, to be forced into a gracious act of total forgiveness, Paul says whatever he owes you I'll pay because he has no money. Obviously, he had nothing with which to pay so Paul says, I'll pay it. You say, "Did Paul have any money?" Must have had a little. He was renting a house he was staying in. And from time to time he had worked and accumulated money so he could support the people around him. Paul says just put it on my bill. And then over in verse 22 he says, "I'm coming to lodge with you. The assumption would be: when I get there I'll settle his account."

There needs to be restitution. Sometimes the restitution is to pay back if a person is able to do that. But, sometimes the best kind of restitution is just sheer forgiveness, and just the grace of God. In this case, there is a marvelous component added, because I want you to follow the thought here. Paul is playing a very, very familiar part in the life of Philemon and Onesimus. It is a part he knew well. It is the same part that Jesus Christ plays in the relationship between the sinner and God. Philemon is like God. He has been violated. He has been defrauded. Onesimus is like the sinner who ran from God, who defrauded God, who wasted his life. And if the sinner is to be reconciled to God, somebody must pay the price, right? It was Christ. Paul knows that substitutionary death of Jesus Christ very well. He has preached it for years. What Paul is saying is magnificent here. Paul is saying: I want to be like Christ. I want to take on the debt and the sin of Onesimus so that he can be reconciled to you.

Does this give you an insight into Paul? Do you remember when he said on several occasions, "Be ye followers of me as I am of Christ?" Here you see him as the substitution for reconciliation, much like Christ. Never are we more like God than when we forgive. Never are we more like Christ than when we carry the debt so that forgiveness can take place. Paul is acting like Christ. He says, I'll take the consequence of his sin; you just take him back. A beautiful, beautiful perspective in this issue of restitution.

It doesn't tell us what Philemon did, but I am quite confident that he forgave, and that he charged nothing to the apostle Paul. How do we forgive? Reception; open our arms, take the person back personally into love. Second, restoration; take them back into useful service. Third, make sure that they have totally and completely had the debt settled. If they can pay, and it is just, and their desire, receive the payment. If they cannot, offer forgiveness, and maybe you at the same time can be the substitute for that reconciliation even to yourself. Such is the character of forgiveness, and such is the forgiveness God asks us to give each other. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, we are so affected by this tremendous lesson in forgiveness. If there is anything, Lord, in my heart or in the hearts of Your people here that could be in any sense viewed as an unforgiving attitude toward anyone, please forgive us and remove it, for we know that You forbid an unforgiving heart as much as you forbid murder. We know that You, though most sinned against, forgive us and require that we forgive the less sin who are the less holy. We also know, Lord, that a lack of

forgiveness forfeits fellowship, communion with You, and leaves our own sins unforgiven. A lack of forgiveness robs us of the love of other Christians and brings us under chastening. And then, we know, frighteningly, that a lack of forgiveness takes the sword out of Your hand and blasphemously claims to be a better judge, makes us unfit for worship, and causes us to fall victim to temptation. Lord, may we not be unforgiving, but may we be like Paul who was forgiving like Christ, and who sought that others should be the same. And thus may we know Your blessing and the joy that comes to obedient believers for our Savior's sake. Amen.

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