The Motives of One Who Forgives
Scripture: Philemon 19-25
Code: 57-4

If you will, open your Bible this morning to our final of four lessons in the wonderful little epistle of Philemon. We've entitled these four lessons, "Living Lessons on Forgiveness." For those of you who haven't been with us in the series, just a brief review. The apostle Paul wrote this letter which is only one chapter, 25 verses long. He wrote it to a friend, a friend by the name of Philemon. He had led Philemon to Christ. Philemon had obviously grown in Christ. It is evident from this letter that he was a man of great Christian character and conviction. His wife is mentioned in verse 2, Apphia, and most likely his son also is identified as Archippus, who also was involved in Christian ministry. Apparently, Philemon was a man of some wealth; at least he was able to have the church at Colossae meet in his own house. And so, he was well acquainted with many of the spiritual leaders and preachers and teachers of that time.

There was another member of the household of Philemon, a slave who is mentioned in verse 10, by the name of Onesimus. Onesimus had wanted his freedom. He was not a Christian, and so he ran away. He was a fugitive runaway slave, and when he left he must have taken money or something of value to support himself in the underground of the city of Rome where he went. By the providence of God, this runaway slave in the city of Rome got in contact somehow with the apostle Paul who was there in Rome a prisoner in a hired house, but still able to preach and teach the Word of God to people who came and went. Perhaps the distress of Onesimus' situation was so severe, perhaps the conviction of his son so great, that he determined to find Paul about whom he must have known since he was so familiar to all of the people in Philemon's house and the church that met there.

Whatever the circumstances were, he came into the hearing of Paul's preaching and was converted to Jesus Christ. This slave, Onesimus, then being a Christian became a very dear and treasured friend of Paul, and a helper of Paul even in his time of imprisonment. When Paul found out, however, that he was a runaway slave who had run from Paul's own friend Philemon, he knew he had to send him back. This letter, then, from Paul to Philemon has one major emphasis: it asks Philemon to forgive this runaway slave, Onesimus, who has now become a believer. And so we say it is a living lesson on forgiveness.

As we have already learned, forgiveness is a promise. That's really what it is. It's a promise. It's a promise never to take revenge. It is the opposite of a refusal to forgive, which is a promise to seek revenge. If you want a simple definition then of forgiveness, think of it as a promise never to take revenge. It is a verbally declared promise. It is a statement of love that affirms, "I hold no anger, I hold

no hatred, I hold no bitterness against you." And it has a three- fold perspective: I won't ever bring it up to you, I won't ever bring it up to anybody else, I won't ever bring it up to myself. That's forgiveness. No matter what you have done to me, no matter how you have offended me, I make a promise never to seek revenge. I hold no anger, I hold no hatred, I hold no bitterness, I won't ever bring it up to you, I won't ever bring it up to anybody else, and I won't ever bring it up to me. That's forgiveness.

Forgiveness, we have noted, is the most God-like and the most Christ-like act a Christian can do. Never are you more like God or Christ than when you forgive, because that is what God does, that is what Christ does. Forgiveness is a magnificent virtue. Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, after having been tried at Westminster and condemned to death without any just cause, spoke to his judges. These are his famous words, quote: "As St. Paul held the clothes of those who stoned Stephen to death, and as they are both now saints in heaven and shall continue there friends forever, so I verily trust shall therefore most heartily pray, that though your lordships have now here on earth been judges to my condemnation, we may nevertheless hereafter cheerfully meet in heaven in everlasting salvation." End quote. Oh, the beauty of forgiveness. The beauty of the forgiveness of Stephen of which Thomas More spoke who said, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," while they crushed his life out with stones. The beauty of the forgiveness of Jesus who looked at His crucifiers and said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Now, this wonderful little letter without ever mentioning the word "forgiveness" teaches us a living lesson in forgiveness. It teaches us some very essential elements of forgiveness in most gentle, most practical and most subtle ways. Paul has already helped us to see and identify the kind of character one has to have to forgive. In verses 4 through 7 we indicated that if you are going to have the character of one who forgives you will have a concern for the Lord, a concern for people, a concern for fellowship, a concern for knowledge, a concern for Christ's glory and a concern for service. And all of that comes out of verses 4 to 7. Then, Paul also made us very aware not only of the character of one who forgives, but of the action of one who forgives, and we noted that there are three elements to that action. There is reception, then restoration, and then restitution. That's in verses 8 through 18. And then, we come now to the final verses of this letter, verses 19 through 25. And Paul opens to us insight into the motives for forgiveness. Why forgive? What is the compelling driving internal motivation? Now, again I remind you that all of these features that we've been looking at are subtle in this letter; but they are present, and they do give us a full description of one who forgives. What motivates someone to forgive? Certainly, forgiveness is bold. Certainly, forgiveness is brave. Certainly, forgiveness is heroic. But at the same time it should be normal for a humble Christian.

So, it is on the note of motives that Paul closes the letter with some gracious but pregnant words meant to excite the heart of Philemon to forgive Onesimus. And each one of his final remarks in those remaining verses carries in it the embryo of a truth that acts as motivation for us to forgive as well.

What then motivates a person to forgive? Number one, the recognition that I owe a debt I can't pay. The recognition that I owe a debt I can't pay. Notice verse 19, "I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will repay it." Stop at that point for a moment. This is quite an interesting note. Paul's custom was to dictate his letters to an amanuenses or a secretary. Somebody who wrote them down. But it was also Paul's custom at the end of many of his letters to pick up the quill and to sign his own name. For example, at the end of the letter to the Colossians which would have been delivered at the same time Philemon was being delivered, you'll notice in chapter 4 verse 18 that epistle closes with this, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand: remember my imprisonment, grace be with you." Not unlike what you might do today were you to dictate a letter and have your secretary write it all down and then sign your name and add a PS in your own hand. It was common for the apostle Paul to pick the pen and write something with his own hand.

Now, you will notice that he has said something very significant in verse 18. He said, "If Onesimus has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." This is the issue of restitution. Paul knows Onesimus has nothing. He can't repay what he stole. He can't repay the 500 denarii that Philemon had to spend to get someone to take Onesimus' place. He doesn't have that money. So, Paul says instead of trying to get it out of him, he doesn't have it, just charge it to my account. And then, most interestingly, Paul says, "I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it." And Paul picks up the pen and signs the IOU with his own name. That's what he's doing. I'm writing my own name with my own hand as a guarantee that if you'll put it on my account I'll pay it, and he keeps the pen in hand from verse 19 to the end. And so, the last number of verses here come from the apostle Paul himself.

So, we have here not only what is from his inspired mind but what is from his own hand, as well. He is signing his name and saying I will make restitution for Onesimus who has no money. Obviously, Paul must have had some. You'll remember that he had received some gifts during his imprisonment. He notes them in Philippians chapter 2 verse 30 and chapter 4 verses 14 to 18 and says to the Philippian church, "Thank you for sending me some things, some money, some support in my imprisonment." So, he had some resources, perhaps he had enough to pay the debt. Paul is willing to do that. But then, notice what he says in parenthesis. "Lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well." What is he saying here? He's saying, "By the way, I know Onesimus owes you a debt. But may I remind you that you owe me a greater debt than he owes you?"

Here's Paul's plan. Put his debt on my account, then cancel it because you owe me so much. That's what he says. Now, there's a principle here. Philemon is not just a man who is owed the payment of a debt. Philemon is also a debtor who owes a far greater and unpayable debt to Paul. Onesimus owes Philemon a material debt. Philemon owes Paul a spiritual debt. Onesimus owes Philemon a temporal debt. Philemon owes Paul an eternal debt. Why? Paul had given him the gospel. Paul had led him to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. How is he ever going to pay that back? So, he says Onesimus'

debt should be put on my account and then cancel because you owe me so much, because I was used by God to deliver you from death and hell.

Now, the principle is just that simple. Somebody does something against you, offends you, owes you something, remember this: you owe such unpayable debts to others who have generously, and graciously, and faithfully, and lovingly, benefited you with the richest of spiritual blessings, and they don't demand payment, and neither could you pay it should they demand it, so can't you release the simple temporal financial debt or obligation of one who has only offended you in an earthly way? That's his point.

Let me personalize it. I'm in debt to many people. I'm so deeply in debt to so many people for so much that I could never ever come close to repaying it. I'm in debt to my godly parents. I'm in debt to my mother and father who led me to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. I'm in debt to them for teaching me the Scriptures. I'm in debt to them for leading me into ministry. I'm in debt to them for supporting me and supplying my needs and educating me. I'm in debt to them for holding me to a disciplined life and making me spiritually accountable for my behavior. I could never repay my debt to my parents. I'm in debt to my wife for her friendship, for her love, for her support, for her wisdom, her input, her correction, her convictions. I'm in debt to her. I could never repay the spiritual debt that I owe Patricia. I'm in debt to my children for loving me even in my weaknesses. I'm in debt to my children for their kindness, for their concern, for their care for their father, for their dutiful response to the things I ask of them. I'm in debt to friends. I'm in debt to a whole world of friends who have ministered to me graciously and beneficially. I am in debt to my teachers. I am in debt to men who have written books, books that have shaped my life and my thinking and my ministry. I'm in debt to my co-workers and co-pastors. I'm in debt to you as a congregation because you have so consistently given me your prayers and your wisdom and your fellowship, and you even paid my wages for many years.

I am so deeply in debt to so many people for so much spiritual blessing that I could never repay. Never. And I am so in debt to so many that only God can pay them back. Only God. And God will have to repay them all by giving them an eternal reward for all that they have sacrificed for me because I can never pay them back. Can I then who owe so much, to so many, not forgive someone who owes a simple earthly debt to me? See Paul's point? Since I have so many spiritual debts that I can never repay, can I not allow gladly some material debt to go unpaid and fully forgive the one who owes it? So, Paul with his inspired genius seeks to motivate us to forgive by reminding us of how much we owe.

Second motivation: the recognition that I can become a blessing to others. If I forgive I can become a blessing to others, verse 20, "Yes, brother," and there's that endearing kind-heartedness of Paul, "Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord, refresh my heart in Christ." And the words "me and my" are emphatic in the Greek. He's saying you have blessed so many, he already said that back in the first part of this wonderful book, verse 7, he says, "I have come to have much joy and comfort in

your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." You have blessed so many people for so long. Now it's my turn, Paul says. Brother, let me be blessed, let me profit, let me benefit, let me find spiritual usefulness. And this is a cognate of the very word Onesimus, so he's still using that play on words for the very name of Onesimus, which means beneficial or useful. It's my turn, he says, if you'll forgive him you'll bless me, you'll benefit me in the Lord. What does he mean by that? In the spiritual dimension, in the sphere of the spiritual. So, let me benefit from you, from your action, from your act of forgiveness. Let me benefit from you receiving him, restoring him, and cancelling his debt. That will benefit me. How is it going to benefit Paul? Oh, give him joy. Give him joy. As John the Apostle said, he had no greater joy than to hear that his children walked in love. Paul would say the same. I have no greater joy than to know that my children walk in love toward each other.

You remember to the Philippians in chapter 2, those very wonderful words, chapter 2 verse 2? "Make my joy complete?" How can we do that, Paul? How can we give you joy? "By being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose, not being selfish or conceited, but humble regarding others more important, and looking on the things of others and not your own." In other words, Philemon, if you will humble yourself and consider Onesimus more important than yourself, and seek unity, and love, and fellowship, and therefore forgive that man, you will bring me joy.

And so, he's saying you should be motivated by wanting to be a blessing to others. You should be motivated to forgive because it will rejoice the heart of another. "So," he says, "let me benefit from you in the Lord." And then adds, "Refresh my heart in Christ," again in that spiritual sphere. Bless me, refresh me. You refreshed everybody else back in verse 7; now it's my turn. The forgiveness of Onesimus by Philemon will bring spiritual joy and refreshment because Paul loves both those men. Paul wants them to be one. Paul loves the unity of the church. Paul wants Colossae as a church to see that forgiveness as a great example, an object lesson. If Philemon refuses to forgive Onesimus, it will burden the heart of Paul, it will sadden the heart of Paul, it will trouble the heart of Paul because he loves both those men, and he loves that church, and he loves the unity of the church. Any failure to forgive will injure that relationship, it will injure that church. It will mar its ministry and its effectiveness, and it will misrepresent the power of the gospel to the unconverted world that's watching. So, he simply says you've been willing to do so much refreshing for other people, would you just do this for me? Would you forgive this man, and refresh me, and bless me, and give me joy? Two good motives to forgive. You owe more than you can ever pay and if you forgive you'll bless the saints, because you'll pursue unity.

Third motive, the recognition that I am called to be obedient to the Lord. Verse 21, Paul says, "Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you since I know that you will do even more than what I say." Again with pen in hand, Paul says, "Look, I have confidence in your obedience." And he touches that heart string again in Philemon that is plucked by the need to obey God. He's not talking about being

obedient to Paul because back in the early part of the chapter, you'll remember Paul said to him, verse 8, "I do have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you."

So, Paul never did command him. Paul is just saying I know you'll obey the Lord in this. Paul is confident that Philemon is a godly man. He laid out his characteristics in verses 4 to 7. He is confident that he will act in a right way to obey God's command to forgive. Remember, I told you that that theology of forgiveness is not in this letter, but we can assume Philemon knew it? We can assume Philemon was well acquainted with Matthew chapter 6, with the principle there that if you don't forgive your brother, God's not going to forgive you. He was very familiar with Matthew 18 principles, like you must forgive, you must forgive 70 times 7, or as Luke 17:3 and 4 tells us, you must forgive if need be seven times a day. He was well familiar with the apostle Paul's conviction, 2 Corinthians 2:7, that forgiveness was essential. He certainly was sure of what Paul said in Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13, though he hadn't read them, that he must forgive because he had been forgiven so much. Philemon knew that God commanded forgiveness. Paul is sure he knew it. That's why he doesn't bring it up. And Paul is even sure he'll do it. He says I'm confident of your obedience. I know you're going to do what God's commanded you to do, and God has commanded you to forgive. And so, you're motivated not only because you owe debts you can't pay, not only because of what he says in verse 20, you'll be a blessing and a joy to other believers, but because you know God expects you to obey.

And then, he even says this in verse 21, "I know you will do even more than what I say." Now, some people have made the unnecessary assumption that this is some call to Philemon to emancipate Onesimus, to free him from his slavery all together, but that isn't indicated in the text. When he says I know you will do even more than what I say, it could be that he is meaning to say you will be more grand in your forgiveness than I've even asked, you will be more magnanimous in your love toward Onesimus than what I have even assumed. You will give to him maybe a prodigal son type of celebration, put on the ring, and the robe, and kill the fatted calf and call a celebration.

Maybe that's the more that he will do. Or maybe the more that he will do is to take him back not only as a servant, and Paul does indicate that he's coming back as a servant in verse 16 when he says you'll not only have him in the flesh but in the Lord. In other words, he'll serve you in the flesh; he'll also serve you in the Lord. And maybe that is the more that he's thinking of here. Maybe the more is you're not only going to return him to menial service as a slave, but you're going to give him liberty to do ministry because of his spiritual capabilities. So, you'll do more than just take him back and restore him to service; you'll give him opportunity to minister alongside of you. Maybe the more might be that you'll not only forgive him but you'll forgive some other people you ought to forgive, and the more is a more magnanimous, far-reaching, and broad kind of forgiveness in which Philemon will even forgive those that Paul doesn't know he holds bitterness against. There are many possibilities for what the more might be. But he says I know your character, I'm confident in it, I know you'll obey and you'll

even do more than I've even asked. Voluntarily, without coercion, not because of law, not because of fear, but out of a righteous heart, Philemon will obey God who commanded him to forgive.

There's a fourth compelling motive for forgiveness and that is the recognition that I am accountable to godly leaders. The recognition that I am accountable to godly leaders. This is very refreshing, verse 22, and Paul says, "And at the same time, also, prepare me a lodging for I hope that through your prayers I will shall be given to you." You know what he's saying? You better do this because I'm coming to check on you. That's what he's saying. I'll be there, get the room ready. This is the least subtle of everything he says in the whole epistle. Oh, by the way, I'm coming. When he wrote 1 Corinthians, he was concerned enough about the Corinthians to warn them that he was coming. And you read 1 Corinthians 4:18 to 21 he says I'm coming. He was still concerned when he wrote 2 Corinthians and you'll find in 2 Corinthians 12:14 and 13:1 that he says I'm telling you again: I'm coming. And all of the times that he says that, on those three occasions, he's really saying to them: you better get your act together because I'm coming. And here, about as unsubtle as to the Corinthians, he says get the room ready, I'm coming. And what that means to say is, I'm going to be there so I will be able to see what you've done.

Paul is really exercising some spiritual authority here. I'm going to check on you. It's a gentle compulsion. It's really not a threat; it's a promise. He doesn't say what he said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 4:21 when he said, "If need be I'll come with a rod." He doesn't say that. He's simply saying I'm going to be there. This is optimistic, by the way, because he's still a prisoner in a rented house in Rome, chained to a Roman soldier. But he says, look at it again, verse 22: "I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you." This is wonderful. He knows that the sovereignty of God works its purposes, but he also knows that the sovereignty of God works its purposes through prayer. Nobody can study prayer without studying that verse. Paul says my hope is that I'll be given to you and that the means of my being given to you is through your prayers.

As I've said in years past, prayers move God. Prayers are the nerves that move the muscles of omnipotence. Prayer is not just an exercise in futility because God's going to do what He's going to do; prayer is the means by which God does what He's going to do. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man does avail much, as James 5 tells us. Paul is very aware of the providential work of God. He referred to it back in verse 15 when he assumed that perhaps Onesimus had even run away in order that he might come back a Christian. He knew God was at work in all of this. And he says, my hope is that God's going to let me come to you and the means of that will be through your prayers. And so what he does is he not only tells Philemon I'm coming but he tells Philemon, in effect: start praying for my arrival. And I'll tell you what, if he knows he's coming, and he's praying for Paul's arrival, that's going to affect the way he acts toward Onesimus, for sure. Because if he hasn't fully forgiven Onesimus, he's not about to have his prayer go something like, "O Lord God, please bring the apostle Paul soon." No way, if he hasn't forgiven Onesimus.

So, Paul literally paints him into a corner. I'm coming and I'm expecting that what will free me is your prayers. That's a heavy burden. Now, Philemon is saying to himself: I don't pray, he doesn't get out of prison. I don't want to be responsible for him being in prison. I've got to pray for his release; I'm praying for his release, I know where his first stop is. Here. I've got to forgive him. That's spiritual accountability. You're to be accountable to those who are over you in the Lord, who have a right as they watch for your souls to know the quality of your life. That's why we talk about church discipline. When we talk about shepherding the sheep, we're talking about making sure that the sheep are obedient, making sure they're doing what the shepherd, the great shepherd of their souls want them to do. You're accountable to those spiritual leaders who are over you, who have a right as they watch for your souls to hold you accountable for forgiveness.

There's a fifth motive, not only the fact that I owe more than I can pay, and that I can bless the saints, and I'm called to obey the Lord, and I'm accountable to my spiritual leaders; but fifthly, another motive to forgiveness is the recognition that I am not alone, but I am a part of a fellowship. I am not alone; I am a part of a fellowship. Verses 23 and 24, wonderful statement Paul makes here, again he's got the pen in his hand and he writes, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers." He identifies Epaphras as a fellow prisoner. He identifies Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke as fellow workers. Five men. Five men precious to Paul, five men precious to Philemon, five men Philemon knows, five men who know Philemon. What's he saying? He's saying you can't act independently of the fellowship. You don't act alone. If you don't forgive, you will fracture the love bond that exists between these men and you. You will violate their expectations of you. You will set a bad example for them. You can't do just what you want to do as if you existed alone. You not only have a level of accountability to one who is your spiritual leader, but you have a level of responsibility to set the standard for those who are your spiritual friends. Five men. They send their greetings, Philemon. They have high expectations of you.

These men are also mentioned in Colossians 4. Look at Colossians 4, because the verses there in Colossians 4 will give us some insight into these five men. Obviously, Tychicus who carried the letter to the Colossian church could give his own greetings. He also would be known to Philemon, most likely. But then, the list starts with Epaphras in Philemon. Epaphras is mentioned down in Colossians 4:12. "Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bond slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God, for I bear him witness that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis."

Epaphras, named first, probably was converted under Paul. He is most likely the founder of the Colossian church. And the other two churches in the Lycus Valley, there were three all together, namely Laodicea and Hierapolis. Probably, Epaphras had founded those three churches. He was himself from Colossae, certainly well known to Philemon. He, being described here as one of your

number, was still associated, of course, with the church meeting in the house of Philemon. He is a bondslave of Jesus Christ, which speaks of his deep commitment to service. He is a man of prayer, laboring earnestly, constantly praying for the perfection of the saints, that they would be fully assured, that they are in the midst of the will of God. He carries a deep pastoral concern for the Colossian church, the Laodicean church, the church at Hierapolis. This is a remarkable and wonderful godly man. In chapter 1 of Colossians and verses 7 and 8, he is called “our beloved fellow bond servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and also informed us of your love in the Spirit.” Epaphras is a noble Christian. He’s the best, godly, committed, prayerful, serving. And then, in Philemon, he is called “my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus.” Now, we don’t know whether that means that he had become also a prisoner of Rome, or whether he had simply identified with Paul’s imprisonment to the point that he took on a self-imposed imprisonment and stood alongside Paul in his chains. He was either a captive or he was a willing prisoner for Paul’s sake.

The second name in the list is the name of Mark. He’s mentioned in Colossians 4:10 as the cousin of Barnabas. And the Colossian church is told that if he comes, they’re to welcome him. Here, we find out that he’s the cousin of Barnabas which may explain something of the conflict in Acts 15. You remember when Paul and Barnabas were going on their journey, John, Mark had come along only he was weak and didn’t like the difficulty. And you remember he wanted out, and so Paul said that’s enough of him, get rid of him. If he’s not strong enough for the deal, get rid of him. Barnabas took up his defense, and you remember there was a parting of the ways of Paul and Barnabas. This explains maybe why Barnabas had such an attachment to Mark; they were cousins. Mark, by the way, was much improved by this time. Through that strong discipline from Paul, he was taught a great lesson. Probably under very strong influence from Peter, 1 Peter 5:13 may indicate that. And then, under the tutelage of Barnabas himself, Mark had come full circle to spiritual strength. Mark became such a wonderful man that in 2 Timothy 4:11, when Paul was at the end of his life and wrote to Timothy, he said send me Mark because he’s so useful. So, here is a godly man, Mark.

The third one mentioned in Philemon is Aristarchus. He also is mentioned in Colossians 4:10. Here it says, “Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner.” He is not called a fellow prisoner in Philemon but a fellow worker. So, it may be again that he was a fellow prisoner by choice, not by law, that he was simply willingly attached to the imprisonment of Paul to assist and help Paul. Aristarchus was associated with the city of Thessalonica, according to Acts 20 verse 14. He was with Paul at Ephesus during his third journey and his long stay of several years there. He was even captured by the Ephesian rioters in Acts 19:29, and he was with Paul in the voyage in Acts 27. Here he is with him, sharing this time of imprisonment, perhaps willingly putting himself in bondage to serve Paul. He is known and beloved by Paul, and obviously known and beloved by Philemon.

The next name is that infamous name of Demas. Demas is also mentioned in Colossians chapter 4 verse 14, simply his name, Demas. We don’t know much about Demas. The only thing we do know is sad. Second Timothy 4:10 Paul says, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world.”

Sad. John said, “If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Demas most likely was a hypocrite. But here, he was a part of the fellowship. He was involved in assisting Paul, known to Philemon.

The final name in the list in Philemon is Luke. Colossians 4:14 says, “Luke, the beloved physician.” That’s how he’s known. A Gentile Christian doctor, full of love, the author of the third gospel. Isn’t it interesting out of these five, two of them wrote gospels, Mark and Luke, and they were together with Paul. Luke was often Paul’s traveling companion. Luke wrote the book of Acts. And you’ll read through the book of Acts, chapter 16:20, 21, 27, 28 and the writer will say, we, we, we, we. And that means Luke is along with whatever’s going on. He’s present for that. Some of it was given to him by the Holy Spirit: experiences he didn’t have but much of it he did have. He was with Paul on his second journey at Troas and Philippi, according to Acts 20 verse 6, he went with him to Jerusalem, he was on the voyage recorded in Acts 27. He alone was with Paul in his final imprisonment, 2 Timothy 4:11.

So, here are five very, very well-known prominent people. They know Philemon. They’re in fellowship with him. If he doesn’t forgive, he’ll destroy that bond with those men. You see, you don’t do things in isolation. If you hold a grudge, you fracture your fellowship. Forgiveness then, is compelling. It is compelling because I owe debts I can’t pay, because I can bless the saints if I forgive because I am called to obey; and God says to forgive, because I’m accountable to my spiritual leaders, and because I must remember that I’m a part of a fellowship that is interrupted by sin.

Finally, forgiveness is motivated by the recognition that I must be empowered by the grace of God. I must be empowered by the grace of God. Verse 25, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” That’s Paul’s final words. And he puts the quill down and what he is saying is, “Philemon, I just want to remind you that in order to do this, you’re going to have the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.” You can’t do it on your own. Human nature couldn’t forgive this offense. This familiar benediction is really a prayer, and not very general here but very specific, that divine grace may be granted to Philemon and all his family and the church at Colossae. All of you, so that you can forgive Onesimus. Paul is asking what is not possible in the flesh because the flesh wants vengeance. What is not possible by the law because the law wants justice? But what is possible by grace? The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, working with your spirit, your inner man. That’s the same grace that allowed Christ to forgive. Paul says, may you have that same grace to forgive that allowed Christ to forgive.

Those are the motives. You must forgive. Why, you owe a debt you could never pay. You can bless the saints. You can obey God. You can fulfill your accountability to your spiritual leaders. You can keep the fellowship intact. And, you can do it in the power of the grace of Christ who forgave you.

That’s the end of the book, that’s not the end of the story. How did it end? No doubt Philemon forgave Onesimus. Paul was released from that imprisonment. Made many trips. Surely, one of them was to

Colossae and to the house of Philemon. He did go east, even though originally he thought he wanted to go west. You remember about six years before he wrote this letter he wrote Romans and he said, “I’m coming, and after I get there I’m going to leave you and go west to Spain,” Romans 15:22 to 24. In the intervening years, his plans had changed. He was in Rome, but he decided, “I’m not going to Spain. I’m not going to conquer new territory. I’ve got to go back and fix some old territory.” When he came out of that first imprisonment, he couldn’t go west because he had to go and fix some of the churches, because they had fallen into sin. And one of the places he must have gone was Colossae, and one of the houses he must have visited, of course ‘cause that’s where the church met, was Philemon’s. And so, he must have found out.

Bible scholars will tell you it’s not likely that this book would have found its way into the New Testament canon if Philemon hadn’t forgiven Onesimus, because it would have left Philemon to appear for all of human history as a godly virtuous wonderful man. And if that were not the case, then there would not have been the Spirit of God’s purpose to leave this book in the text to give a false impression about that man. So, the fact that God included this in the canon means also that God wonderfully moved to accomplish this in the life of Philemon and Onesimus.

The whole church must have known about the letter. I mean, the whole church, not just at Colossae. Because it was an inspired book and it got circulated everywhere. And it was one of the great stories of the apostolic age, and we can be sure that there would be something somewhere to say it never happened if it never happened. But it stands as a testimony to forgiveness, and must have been responded to.

And just as a footnote, history records that some time after this, a man became the pastor of the church at Ephesus and his name was Onesimus. Could it be the same man? If so, we certainly know the wonderful power of forgiveness. Forgiveness is powerful. That’s partly why that story is here. Forgiveness impacts people.

Let me update the story. We’ve just celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. December 7, 1941. 7:55 AM on a cloudless Sunday, the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor. In two hours, 2,403 Americans were dead, 1,178 were wounded, 169 US aircrafts were totally destroyed, three massive ships sunk, and 18 others damaged. This incredible attack was led by a 39 year old Japanese top gun pilot, Commander Mitsuo Fuchida whose life hero was Adolf Hitler. Fuchida led 183 Japanese airplanes into the harbor at Honolulu and devastated thousands of men and a whole nation and triggered, as you know, the massive, massive death that came about through American atomic retaliation, as well as conventional weaponry. Mitsuo Fuchida, a name that you read over, and over, and over, and over in anything you ever read about World War II. His plane was hit numerous times as he came and went from Pearl Harbor, but he survived.

After the war was over, he was besieged with memories of death. He decided to become somewhat of a recluse and so he took up farming near Osaka. It gave him time to think. He focused increasingly on the problem of peace, and he decided in the midst of his guilt and worry over all that had been done in the war to write a book. He determined that the title of the book would be “No More Pearl Harbors.” He would urge the world to devote itself to pursuing peace. Mitsuo Fuchida struggled in vain, however, to find a principle by which peace could work. For years, he tried to find the principle that would let him write the book. Couldn’t find it. He couldn’t find anything in the religions of Japan, the philosophies of the world.

Then, the story took a dramatic change. The story goes like this. The first report came from a friend, a lieutenant who had been captured by the Americans, and incarcerated in a prisoner of war camp in America. Fuchida saw his name in a newspaper on a list of POWs who were returning to Japan. He determined to visit him. When they met they spoke of many things. Then, Fuchida asked the question upper most in his mind: how did the Americans treat you in the POW camp? His friend said, “They were treated well.”

Then, he told Fuchida a story which he said made an immense impression upon him and on every prisoner in the American camp. “Something happened at the camp where I was interred,” he said, “which has made it possible for us who were in that camp to forego all our resentment and hatred and to return with a forgiving spirit and a feeling of light-heartedness instead.” Fuchida said, “What is that?” The former prisoner said to him, “There was a young American girl named Margaret ‘Peggy’ Covell,” whom they judged to be about 20 years old, “who came to the camp on a regular basis doing all she could for the prisoners. She brought things to them they might enjoy, such as magazines and newspapers. She looked after their sick and she was constantly solicitous to help them in every way. They received an immense shock, however, when they asked her why she was so concerned to help these Japanese prisoners. She answered, ‘Because my parents were killed by the Japanese army.’”

Such a statement might shock a person from any culture but it was incomprehensible to the Japanese. In their society, no offense could be greater than the murder of one’s parents. Peggy tried to explain her motives. She said her parents had been missionaries. When the Japanese invaded the islands, Philippines, her parents escaped to the mountains in North Luzon for safety. In due time, however, they were discovered. The Japanese charged them with being spies and told them they were to be put to death. They earnestly denied that they were spies, but the Japanese would not be convinced and they were executed.

Peggy didn’t hear about her parents’ fate until the end of the war. At first she was furious with grief and indignation, thoughts of her parents’ last hours of life filled her with great sorrow. She envisioned them trapped, wholly at the mercy of their captors with no way out. She saw the merciless brutality of the soldiers. She saw them facing their Japanese executioners and falling lifeless to the ground on that far off Philippine mountain. Then, Peggy began to consider her parents’ selfless love for the

Japanese people. Gradually, she became convinced that they had forgiven the people God had called them to love and serve. Then, it occurred to her that if her parents had died without bitterness or rancor toward their executioners, why should her attitude be any different? Should she be filled with hatred and vengeful feelings when they had been filled with love and forgiveness?

Therefore, Peggy chose the path of love and forgiveness. She decided to minister to the Japanese prisoners in the nearby POW camp as a proof of her sincerity. Fuchida was touched by the story, but he was especially impressed with the possibility that it was exactly what he had been searching for, a principle sufficient to be a basis for peace: the principle was a forgiving love. Could that be the principle upon which the message of his projected book, “No More Pearl Harbors,” could be based?

Shortly after this, Fuchida was summoned by General Douglas MacArthur to Tokyo. As he got off the train at Shibuya Station, he was handed a pamphlet entitled, “I Was a Prisoner of Japan.” It told about an American sergeant, Jacob DeShazer, who had spent 40 months in a Japanese prison cell, and who after the war had come back to Japan to love and serve the Japanese people by helping them to come to know Jesus Christ.

To make the story short, DeShazer told about how he was a bombardier on one of the 16 army B-25 airplanes under General Jimmy Doolittle, launched 18, April 1942 from the deck of the USS Hornet to bomb Tokyo. None of the planes were shot down, but they did run out of fuel. DeShazer was captured and incarcerated for 40 months, the duration of the war. DeShazer noted that all the prisoners were treated badly. He said that at one point, he almost went insane from the violent hatred by the Japanese guards.

Then, one day a guard brought them a Bible. They were in solitary confinement so they took turns reading it. When it was DeShazer’s turn, he had it for three weeks. He read it eagerly and intensely, Old and New Testament. Finally he writes, “The miracle of conversion took place June 8, 1944.” DeShazer was converted.

He determined that if he lived until the war was over and if he were released, he would return to the US, study the Bible for a period of time, return to Japan to share the message of Christ with the Japanese people, and that’s exactly what he did. Great crowds came to hear him. Many responded and were saved. Here was a second person who forgave the Japanese and came in forgiveness to show them the love of Christ.

Fuchida was deeply impressed. He got a New Testament. He began to read the New Testament. In September of 1949, eight years after Pearl Harbor, he was reading Luke 23, and he heard Jesus say this, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” And he bowed his knee, and received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Mitsuo Fuchida, devotee of Adolf Hitler, became a Christian. He wrote his book. You can look at it in the library today. The title of it, “From Pearl Harbor to Golgotha.”

You might also be interested to know that Fuchida is in heaven now, but before he went he spoke at Grace Community Church. The power of forgiveness to affect the world. The Holy Spirit knew it, God knew it, Paul knew it, Philemon needed to know it and that's why this book is here. And that's why this lesson is taught to you. Let's pray.

Thank You, Father, for the great joy that You give to us through Your Word, for the great reminder of the virtue of forgiveness. May we be faithful to forgive that we might enjoy blessing, fellowship and that we might have a powerful witness to the watching world. May the world that sees us see a forgiving people even as You have forgiven us, may we be like You and manifest You to those who watch by forgiving others. All for Christ's glory we ask. Amen.

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