

# “Forgive Others as I Have Forgiven You”

Philemon 1-21

This letter to Philemon, almost all of which I read earlier -- only leaving out a few final personal greetings, is an interesting book of the Bible. It was a personal letter to a leader of the church in Colossae. St. Paul wrote it and had it also delivered with his larger letter to the Colossians. But this personal letter to Philemon was also to be made public. Paul addressed it not only to Philemon, but also to Apphia, Archippus, and to the church that meets in Philemon’s home.

If Philemon, a leader of the church at Colossae, chose to disregard Paul’s request of him, all the church would know of it. This is not Paul being sneaky. This is not just a tool for effective motivation. Paul presented Philemon with a golden opportunity to be a witness to the people of what it means to belong to Christ. It will benefit the church that Philemon’s actions are known.

Philemon had a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had stolen something from Philemon and had run away. Under Roman Law, Onesimus’ crimes were punishable by death. Philemon had every right to deal with Onesimus as harshly as he wanted.

However, Onesimus, having found his way to Paul -- who is in prison in Ephesus, most likely came to Paul out of guilt and fear (having known him through his master Philemon's work with the church). But while with Paul, Onesimus heard the Word of the Lord and became a believer in Christ.

For the sake of Onesimus, Paul appeals to Philemon's saintly virtues of love and forgiveness. Knowing that Paul, as an apostle of Christ Jesus, had Philemon's love and respect, he knew that he could have simply demanded that Philemon take back Onesimus into his house and not punish him. But he made no such demand.

Now Onesimus understood that the consequences for the actions against his master under the law meant death. He probably was thinking that he wouldn't mind Paul demanding that nothing happen to dear old Onesimus. Imagine what is going through Onesimus' mind as he is carrying this letter back to Philemon, knowing that, as a runaway slave who stole from his master, he could or most certainly would be executed for his crime, (except that as a child of God, he now understood that there is forgiveness in this world).

He knew that through the Word of God spoken by Paul, his sins had been forgiven by God. Now the question was whether his sins would also be forgiven by God's people against whom he sinned.

This is where difficulty arises for us also. Do we forgive those who repent of their sin against us and receive them back into our fellowship better than before -- knowing that our relationship with them has grown and

increased through the strength of the Gospel. Or do we receive them back holding two strikes against them, letting them know that “one more strike and you’re out.”

This was the dilemma of Philemon and Onesimus. This is the struggle in which we find ourselves in this world. If someone does us wrong, repents, and changes their ways, do we continue to hold those memories against them?

Or what seems to happen even more often is that we perceive that someone has wronged us, we hear that someone said something about us, or we believe the rumor about someone else, and then we hold a grudge, never even bothering to talk to the person in question. But then, of course, all the rumors in Quincy are true, right. Have you ever heard one that wasn’t?

If you have been wronged in some way, or perceive that you have been wronged in some way, the sin is only compounded if you talk to anyone else about it other than the person in question.

St. Paul had to write this letter not only to Philemon, but to the rest of the Colossians, because undoubtedly they had also become involved in the estranged relationship of Onesimus and Philemon. They had formed an opinion of this runaway slave. They had probably each given their two-cents worth about what to do with him or how to punish him.

But Paul tells Philemon, and in doing so tells the rest of them, that Onesimus is now his son, more importantly he is now God’s son, and he is

now your brother in the faith. The Law demands Onesimus' life for the sins he committed. The Law does not give Onesimus the option of paying back what he stole. The Law does not allow Onesimus the privilege of making a deal, working off his sentence, or making a plea bargain. Under Roman Law, for Onesimus' crimes, the wages of sin is death.

Paul reminds Philemon and the church of the Colossians that God's Law demanded the same for their sins. Yet, God showed mercy. Philemon owes Paul his very self. We also do not have the option of making a plea bargain with God, working off our sins, or making any other deal with the Lord. The wages of sin is death. God has shown mercy.

Paul gives Philemon the opportunity to live out Christ's words: "Forgive others as I have forgiven you." And Philemon was able to fulfill these words and receive Onesimus back into his fellowship being assured of his own forgiveness won for him through Christ's death and resurrection.

We have this same calling in regard to the sinners in our lives, even though, like Onesimus, they sinned intentionally against us. We forgive others as Christ has forgiven us. We are empowered to do this because of the confidence in our own undeserved forgiveness from God. As a slave to sin, Jesus purchased you at a price – at the price of His own self.

Our confidence in this reality assures us of the truth of God's Word that we have a faithful Father who forgives us because He loves us, and our confidence in what we have received allows us to reflect that love and forgiveness to others. Amen.