

A Story of Forgiveness and Grace -

Philemon 1-25

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Before we get started let me lay out the path we'll be traveling together in the next two Sunday evenings. Philemon is a story within a story. We have the whole Bible story and then we have parts of that story in each of the 66 books. For all of you who have been in Scripture Sowers this is the $39+27=1$ concept. So, this week we'll talk about this smaller story of Philemon and two of its implications. Next week we'll see some of the doctrine and how it fits into the bigger story.

Introduction

Do you love stories? I love stories! So let me tell you one. Imagine this...You are living in a town called Colossae. It's around 62AD. Your name is Onesimus. Literally your name means useful, or profitable. You are a slave. Your master, Philemon, is a member of "The Way". Some kind of new religious group that hasn't been around for very long. He even runs a little church in his house. He's a pretty nice guy really. He doesn't treat you badly or anything, but you just can't get over your lack of freedom to do whatever you want. To come and go as you please. To work, or not work as you like. This slave thing just isn't your cup of tea. Tomorrow night you're running away. You're committed to your perceived freedom. You must be...this trip could cost you your life.

You take off - probably under the cover of darkness. Perhaps you hitched a ride down the Lycus to the Meander River with a person of like values. You're anxious, but you've made it to the sea. Now, where to? Rome, yeah, Rome, it's huge and what's the likelihood of anyone from Colossae noticing you there? You use what's left of the money you "borrowed" from your master back home and board a ship to Rome.

Once in Rome you're forced to make ends meet by petty theft and trickery. You run with people on America's Most Wanted, but life is not so bad. You have to watch your back, but at least you're free. Somehow you end up at one of the many prison's and meet an old man named Paul. He can't see very well. He has many scars and his body just doesn't work real well from the many beatings he's been given. As you listen to his wild stories of shipwrecks and snakebites you soon realize he is the same Paul your master, Philemon, has talked about. You wanna to run. Your face gets hot with guilt and your hands begin to shake. You want to leave, but you can't seem to get up. You're fascinated by his tales of this Jesus he talks about. Back home it all seemed very confusing and quite frankly... like a lot of foolishness. But now, it's like something is pulling at you from the inside. This Jesus is really God. He really died to save people like you. You see it. Paul talks of being the chief of sinners and you can relate. Finally, one afternoon you fall on your knees under the heavy burden of sin and repent. You believe what he says about Jesus. That he lived perfect. He died on a cross. He paid for your sin. He rose from the dead and now lives with God. You are a believer. You have been born again!

And now, the Spirit is convicting that you must do something about your situation as a runaway slave. In confidence you tell Paul the whole story and wait for his direction. He tells

you you need to go back to Colossae and seek Philemon's forgiveness. You hesitantly agree. But again, this could cost you your life.

So Paul writes a letter to your master Philemon and sends you on your way with Tychicus. You are hopeful and yet, scared.

So, here we are. We're at the door of Philemon's house. He answers, and looks at you quizzically. You hand him the letter we know as the book of Philemon.

Let's pray before we get into God's Word.

Greetings v.1-3

- 1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
- 2 To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:
- 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you ever skip over greetings like this when your reading your bible? Ever think to yourself, "I Paul...blah..blah.blah" and your reading of the text devolves into something in the rhelm of Charlie Brown's teacher? Well your not alone. I'm pretty sure everyones done it at one time or another. But don't do it here! Slow down and look at what God is saying through Paul.

There are two things I want you to notice.

1. In verse 2 Paul addresses Philemon. Is that all? You might think so from the name of the book. No, he says, "and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:". He's not just writing to Philemon. Now he is the focus but there's more. He's writing to the whole church in his house. Don't miss that. That's important. God doesn't call Philemon or you, to walk this life alone. No, he has put us here together as a family for strength and accountability. Life is going to be hard and we need others to hold our feet to the fire. Paul knows this and makes sure that Philemon knows this letter is to all, not just him. They will be the ones holding him accountable if he fails to do what Paul asks.

2. Verse 3 says, "Grace to you and peace from God". If you skip over that and let Charlie Brown's teacher take over you will have missed out on what drives the rest of the book. These few words ought to signal Philemon to put on his crash helmet. If life was easy and the battle were already over he wouldn't need grace and he'd already have peace! But life's not that way is it? It's not for us now and from the looks of it it wasn't that way for Philemon. The rest of the book is going to call him to a monumental task that he cannot accomplish in and of himself. He's going to need grace and peace from God and Jesus.

The Character of the Forgiveness v.4-7

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I

pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

A Lover of God and a Lover of People v.4-5

When people talk about Philemon they talk about his Faith in Jesus. Paul says, "I thank God...because I hear of your...faith. Paul is imprisoned in Rome which is over one thousand miles from Colossae and yet he is hearing about Philemon's faith! Folks, this man has been so transformed by the grace of the Lord Jesus that when he comes up in conversation, Jesus is made much of.

Secondly, when people talk about Philemon they talk of his love for people. We see this at the end of verse five. Do you know anyone whose love for people is well known. That's what Philemon was like. In fact, he loved in a way that when others spoke of him their minds immediately went to his love for others. His love for others characterized him.

A Gospel Sharer v.6

His is not ashamed of the Gospel, and in love he has sent forth Gospel to the people surrounding him. He has represented Christ well in his witness to his neighbors and coworkers and the family of Christ that meets in his home. Knowing this, Paul prays that his witness will cause him, as the NIV states it, "[to] have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." Philemon is growing in the knowledge of Christ by his witness.

A Refresher v.7

Last we see that Philemon is a refresher. I love the word – Refresher. There are people in this world that you hang out with and when they go away you feel like things are better. You feel like life has been brought into perspective. This is Philemon. Don't separate his faith, his love of people and the sharing of that faith from his being a "refresher". It's all part of the same thing. He is besotted, he's full of, he's enamored with - to put it in modern language, "this guy is off the chain" for Jesus.

Do you see it? This is the character of the forgiver. This is the kind of guy who doesn't ask, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" He's not multiplying seventy times seven in his head as Jesus is talking! No, this man is poised and ready to forgive because he knows of what he has been forgiven.

The Plea for Forgiveness - v. 8-16

8Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,
9yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—

Paul starts out verse 8 with the word "accordingly", or Paul might have said consequently - either way he's letting us know that because of the kind of person Philemon is (v. 4-7) he's going to approach the situation in a certain way. Instead of requiring Philemon to obey he chooses to go the route of love and appeal to Philemon. So let's watch. And for those of you in authority over others, whether it be in ministry or parenting or whatever it is...pay close attention to the way Paul pleads for forgiveness.

Full of Love and Humility - v. 8-9

We see at the end of verse 8 and into nine that Paul is coming to Philemon in humility. Look at what he says, "I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also". Why doesn't he say I Paul the APOSTLE! I Paul, someone worthy enough to be in prison for Christ! I Paul, the guy who's writing a large part of the new testament! He doesn't because he is clothed in humility as he comes to Philemon. He knows Philemon's character. He knows that God has done a great work in Philemon's life and he's appealing to that by humble means - not by ruling over him.

Illustration

The Result of Transformation - v. 10-12

This plea is not only humble, it is the result of transformation.

10I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. 11(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)

12I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.

Look at verses 10 through 12. Paul is making this plea on behalf of Onesimus because he (Onesimus) has been transformed. I mean look, Paul's reputation is on the line here some what. He's sending back a runaway slave and asking for an awful lot. What if Onesimus doesn't carry on in a way that honors God? What if he runs away again? What if... Paul puts himself out there for Onesimus because he has seen the transformation of his life. Look at what he says, "I appeal...for my child". Onesimus was an outlaw. He's a fugitive from justice. He was, as Paul says, useless. But Paul has seen the change that only comes from seeing Christ as he is. Sitting at the right hand of God. Judges the living and the dead. Onesimus is not the same man he was when Paul first met him. No, no, he is alive for the first time. He is, praise God useful!

Don't sit there and think that because you are here at church on Sunday night that you are any better than Onesimus. You may say that you know God, but that's not important. As Pastor Russ preached a few weeks ago from Thessalonians there will be a great day of Judgement when all will see and know that Jesus is Lord and yet some will be turned away and cast out into an eternity without Christ. It's not important that you think you know him. It is important that he knows you. You cannot claim to have been raised from death to life and live like a dead man! You cannot! You must be changed by the glorious righteousness of Jesus. If there is no change in your life you have every reason to believe you are still a dead man walking.

Onesimus was not this way and Paul saw it clearly demonstrated in his life. Therefore Paul sends back to Philemon "[his] very heart".

Others Oriented - v. 13-14

This plea is not only humble, it is not only the result of transformation, but it is others oriented.

13 I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel,
14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

Here again we see humble servant leadership at work. The very Apostle Paul is deferring his wants and desires to someone else. He mentions again at the end of thirteen that he is imprisoned for the the gospel and yet, he sends his servant back home for the good of Philemon. He does not want to get in the way of God's work. Philemon has the opportunity to forgive and glorify God on his own and Paul does not want him to do it out of "compulsion". He doesn't want to coerce him into this, he wants to see God work in Philemon from no other outside influence. He could have gotten the result he wanted by just demanding that he do it. But no, he seeks the best, not just the good.

And the Results are Glorious - v. 15-16

And now we see also that its not just humble, it's not only the result of transformation, it's not only for others, but the results are glorious.

15 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,
16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord

Here we get a little look behind that curtain don't we. Here we see glory. Look at the end of 15. FOREVER! This isn't an earth only deal. There are eternal things at stake here. This battle is not only being fought where moth and rust destroy. It's being fought in the heaven's too and at the end of it all when we are together - no slave, no free, it will be glorious to sing praises and dance joyously before the Lord together. Outlaw and peacemaker, Apostle and laymen, we will be together and none of this will matter but the cross and the empty tomb. Can you see it Philemon?! This ends better that you could have hoped. Paul knows he can see it.

The Price of Forgiveness – v 17-20

And from the hieghts of glory we come to the reality of now. This forgiveness has a price.

17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.
18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.
19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.
20 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Forgiveness is not free. There is a price to be paid for sin. Onesimus, of course, has no way of paying that price, and everyone knows it. But here we see a redeemer. Here we see Paul

most like his Lord. If he "owes you anything, charge that to my account". Well, we could go on for days with the imagery here. I'll save it for next week.

Notice though - Paul wants to make sure Philemon knows it's him and not some forged letter to get Onesimus off and he again appeals to Philemon's character. He knows him as a refresher of the saints as we saw in verse seven and he appeals to it again.

Our Confidence – v. 21-22

Now comes the surprise. Well, if you're me, it was a surprise the first time I really read it. Read with me the next to verses.

21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

22 At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Wow! Either Paul is being really presumptuous here or he knows something. So, let's look at it. What does Paul know about Philemon that would raise up in him such a confidence in his "doing right". I mean he's not only confident of Philemon's obedience, but he is confident that he will do "even more than I say". In fact, he's even planning a trip to Philemon's house! It can only be one thing. Look back at v. 4-7. It's not a confidence in Philemon's goodness that has Paul calling the travel agent. No, it's a confidence in the work the Lord has done! Philemon has proven to be God's kind of person and Paul rests his confidence in that.

He's so confident of the work of God in Philemon's life that he assumes his prayers for the visit. Why? Why would Philemon be praying for Paul to come visit. I'll tell you what I think it is. Remember the prodigal son? What happened when the son came home? Dad through a huge party didn't he? I think Philemon is looking forward to his visit. Paul knows his character and with that character their can only be on response to an unforgiven sinner coming to Jesus. Celebration! Can you hear Philemon, "Oh Father, bring our brother Paul to us that we might celebrate Onesimus, His very hearts, salvation together!" What a time, what a time of celebration and thanksgiving.

Closing

Greetings v. 23-24

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

Paul draws the letter to a close by sending greeting some of his fellow workers. If you're curious at all about who fits where in your Bible you should look these folks up and see what other book they are in. After the sending of greetings Paul adds this line...

The Power to Forgive - v.25

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Is this another part of the letter that you sort of casually gloss over? Again, DON'T! Remember at the beginning of this message when we talked about Philemon putting on his crash helmet. Remember why that was? Look back at verse 3. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Now look at verse 25 again. See it. Paul wraps this entire message about forgiveness in Grace. Grace is the engine that drives forgiveness. Grace IS the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me read you something that was tremendously helpful to me as I thought about this. It's a quote from Sinclair Ferguson:

"It is legitimate to speak of "receiving grace," and sometimes (although I am somewhat cautious about the possibility of misusing language) we speak of the preaching of the Word, prayer, baptism, and the Lord's Supper as "means of grace." That is fine, so long as we remember that there isn't a thing, a substance, or a "quasi-substance" called "grace." All there is is the person of the Lord Jesus — "Christ clothed in the gospel," as Calvin loved to put it. Grace is the grace of Jesus. If I can highlight the thought here: there is no "thing" that Jesus takes from Himself and then, as it were, hands over to me. There is only Jesus Himself.

Grasping that thought can make a significant difference to a Christian's life. So while some people might think this is just splitting hairs about different ways of saying the same thing, it can make a vital difference. It is not a thing that was crucified to give us a thing called grace. It was the person of the Lord Jesus that was crucified in order that He might give Himself to us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit."

You see, Paul has not left Philemon to accomplish this difficult task of forgiveness on his own. No, he is praying for and relying on the Grace of God, Jesus Christ himself, to enable Philemon's obedience. You might be thinking, "There's no way I could forgive like Paul is asking Philemon to do. I mean, I can't even forgive my spouse for the comment they made before bed last night." I would say to you, "Amen". I agree! You cannot, and neither can I. Left to our own devices we will wallow in our anger, sulk in our self pity and boil over in our rage at the one who has wronged us. Oh But GOD!

If you remember anything from our time together tonight, remember this...we, believers, have not been left alone, we are not left to our own devices. For our great, mighty and all powerful Creator God is, RIGHT NOW, giving you the grace (See Hebrews 13:20) to achieve all that he has purposed and allowed in your life. Remember what God said about your weakness? He says this, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I know forgiveness can be a struggle but, there is freedom in that forgiveness and you can only get there by grace - by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflect and Respond

- Believer, where have you refused to forgive?
- Where you have authority over people in your life, how do you wield it? Like Paul?
- Unbeliever, you owe a debt to God. Christ stands in Heaven ready to forgive you. Ready to pay, like Paul here in Philemon. Ready to pay your debt in full. Will you come to him?

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