

Forgiveness Paul's Letter to Philemon

Philemon: Background

- The Roman Empire, like most of the ancient world, was a slave-based society.
- Slaves made up something like 25-35% of the empire's 60 million people.
- The emperor alone might own thousands.
- From the earliest days, a slave-owner could inflict any injury or punishment upon a slave that he wanted. There was no crime for doing harm to a slave.
- On the other hand, if a slave murdered his or her master, all the slaves in the household were to be killed. When convicted of a serious crime, a slave might be crucified.

- Around 73 BC there was a huge slave uprising led by a Thracian named Spartacus.
- He soon led an army that repeatedly defeated the armies of Rome and controlled much of southern Italy. Unfortunately, they were stuck on the end of the Italian peninsula and were never able to leave Italy to go to their homelands. Finally, in 71 BC the Roman senate raised a huge army to contend with Spartacus.

- This army won and took 6,000 slaves prisoner. They were crucified along the Appian Way – the main road leading into Rome. Their bodies remained hanging in place for several months.
- This was a warning to other slaves who might think about rebelling against their masters.

- Fast-forward now to about 62 A.D. Nothing has changed regarding the status of slaves in the Roman world. In Colossae in the Eastern empire, a slave named Onesimus escaped from his master Philemon. He ran away and eventually made it to Rome.

- As it happened, Paul led Philemon the slave-owner to Christ while both were in Ephesus a few years before. As it also happened, Onesimus the slave somehow encountered Paul, now a prisoner under house arrest, while in Rome. Paul then had the privilege of leading the slave Onesimus to Christ.

- Onesimus the slave remained in Rome for some time serving Paul the apostle/prisoner, who became his pastor, mentor and friend.
- But Paul knew the story could not end there.
- Onesimus was a fugitive with no legal status in Rome.
- Additionally, Paul saw the need for reconciliation between Onesimus the slave and Philemon the slave-owner.

- Onesimus needed to get up the courage to go back to Colossae and face Philemon so that the two might be reconciled. They were now both brothers in Christ.
- Philemon needed to learn the beautiful and beneficial Christian art of forgiveness.
- The only way to learn forgiveness is to forgive.

- Paul writes to Philemon as the advocate of Onesimus.
- He asks Philemon to receive him, forgive him and potentially even free him.
- This is more than a recommendation.
- Paul promises to pay Philemon anything Onesimus may owe.

Philemon: Examining the Text

- **1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus**
- Paul considers his imprisonment in light of the sovereignty of God.
- He does not blame the Romans or the Jews.
- He credits his humble position to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
- Paul sees his imprisonment as a part of God's plan for him at this time.

- **2 Apphia** is apparently Philemon's wife.
- **Archippus** is apparently Philemon's son, but he also seems to be the pastor or leader of the church.
 - See **Colossians 4:17**
- **4-7** Paul uses a good deal of text telling Philemon how highly he thinks of him and the importance of his ministry to other believers.

- If you do a good job hosting a home Bible study, then you have a similar reinforcement from Paul.
 - See what he says in **v.6**.
- Don't ever minimize the importance of such a ministry of hospitality to the spiritual growth and benefit of the church.

- **8-16** This is where Paul explains to Philemon what happened to Onesimus.
- In the Roman world, citizens like Paul (and perhaps Philemon) had the highest status.
- Other free people came next, but did not enjoy the all the benefits of citizenship.
- Slaves were subhuman.

- But in the church, Philemon and Onesimus were both brothers in the Lord.
- He was returning not simply as a slave, but as an equal member of the church.
 - See also **Colossians 4:7-9**
- Paul's point in **v.16** is that Onesimus should be more valuable to Philemon than to Paul since he was once part of his own household.

- **17-22** Here Paul drives his request home.
- He is asking Philemon for three things:
 - Receive him **17**
 - Forgive him **18-19**
 - Free him? **21** - and look back at **12-14**

Historical Data on Slavery

- Christianity is sometimes blamed for the problem of slavery in the ancient world, or more often in the USA.
- **Fact:** the condition of slaves in the Roman Empire began to improve only after the spread of Christianity – especially after the conversion of Constantine.
- While the USA certainly could have done more to give freedom to slaves and could have done it more quickly, consider the following:
 - Slavery was never legal in Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Maine, Iowa, Oregon, California and other states which entered the union as free states.
 - **1777** Vermont
 - **1783** Massachusetts and New Hampshire
 - **1863** Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation
- How does that stack up with some other countries around the world?
- When was slavery abolished in other places?

– 1906 China	– 1959 Tibet
– 1921 Nepal	– 1960 Niger Rep.
– 1922 Morocco	– 1962 Saudi Arabia
– 1923 Afghanistan	– 1962 Yemen
– 1928 Iran	– 1970 Oman
– 1942 Ethiopia	– 1981 Mauritania
- That information does not excuse the sins of American slave traders or slave owners.
- It is only intended to remind us that our country is not alone in its guilt.
- The injustice caused by slavery is widespread just as sin is common to the entire human race.
- And sadly, though illegal, slavery still exists today and is perhaps more evil than ever.

Philemon: Application

From the perspective of Paul:

- Paul was unjustly imprisoned, but not bitter over his circumstances.
- He was willing to humbly submit to God in his time of difficulty.
- This is not easy, but this kind of humble submission may be a necessary part of our Christian growth.
- Paul was willing to stand behind Onesimus who was at a difficult point in his life.
- Onesimus had proven himself to Paul.
- Paul gave him more than a good reference, he was willing to back up his words by saying he would pay Philemon whatever Onesimus owed him.
- Sometimes God puts people in our lives simply so that we can help them.
- We may find ourselves in the position to be someone’s advocate as Paul was able to be for Onesimus.
- Paul’s resources and abilities were severely limited, but he still did whatever he could.

From the perspective of Onesimus:

- The first thing Onesimus did was prove the reality of his conversion to Paul.
- His name means “profitable” or “useful” and he made himself useful to Paul.
- The best way to get good references behind you is to make yourself valuable to others.
- People will (normally) appreciate your faithfulness.
- “The Synagogue of the Freedmen” in Acts 6:9 shows us that Jerusalem alone was home to many freed slaves.
- There were legal means of being set free in the Roman world, but simply running away was not one of them.
- Onesimus now needed to boldly face Philemon as a brother in the Lord.

- Have you wronged someone who now needs you to openly admit what you have done?
- If we are willing to do whatever it takes to make amends, this will go a long way toward reconciliation.
- (But it might not be wise to confess all your secret sins. I really don’t want to know all the bad things you have ever thought about me!)

From the perspective of Philemon:

- **Forgiveness** is the biggest lesson in this letter.
- Philemon had the legal right to literally do anything he wanted to get back at Onesimus without getting in the least bit of trouble.
- But as a Christian brother Philemon was obligated to forgive.
- What’s more the whole church was watching.

- If we are holding any grudges, harboring any bitterness, refusing to let go of some past hurt, then we are only stunting our own spiritual growth.
- Refusing to forgive is like taking poison in the hope that it kills somebody else.

- Please take some time to examine your heart, consider your hurts and be willing to simply let them go.
- Your integrity as a Christian depends on it.
- Keep in mind that we owe Christ so much more than we can possibly ever repay.
 - See **Matthew 18:21-35**