

Lesson 1

A Story of Forgiveness

The forgiveness God has extended to us serves as the reason and the measure for our forgiving others.

Philemon

“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Sometimes the simplest tasks can become complicated. For instance, a young man decided to make macaroni and cheese. He read the directions on the box and poured the noodles into the boiling water when he noticed that there didn’t seem to be enough noodles for even one person. So he poured in another box of macaroni noodles. But that still didn’t seem like enough for his appetite. He then added a third box of noodles. Finally the pot looked full enough to satisfy his hunger.

Ten minutes later the young man realized that Kraft did know what they were doing when they packaged their macaroni noodles. He had so much macaroni that he could have eaten it for the next week. His simple task had turned into a fiasco.

Asking forgiveness seems like a simple task, but when we go to do it, we can turn it into something that is more than we can handle.

This study focuses on Paul’s appeal for forgiveness on behalf of his new brother in Christ.

Getting Started

1. Why is granting forgiveness difficult sometimes?
2. What might make granting forgiveness easier?

Searching the Scriptures

Prison Letter

Paul began his letter calling himself a “prisoner of Jesus Christ” because he wrote while under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his hearing before Caesar. His incarceration had resulted from preaching the gospel of Christ and not from breaking human laws.

3. Read Philemon 1. How does Paul calling himself a prisoner instead of an apostle set up the tone of his letter?
4. Why would the tone of Paul’s letter be important?

Timothy, a young man from the area of Derbe and Lystra, had joined Paul on Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–3). He served faithfully, both as a companion and as a messenger of Paul until the end of Paul’s life.

Paul addressed this letter to Philemon, a man whom he loved as a brother in the family of God and a fellow in the service of Jesus Christ. Paul further mentioned Apphia and Archippus as addressees of his letter. Apphia probably was the wife of Philemon, and Archippus, the son of Philemon and Apphia.

Paul encouraged Archippus to fulfill the ministry he had received in the Lord (Colossians 4:17). Archippus may have served as pastor of the church that met in Philemon's home (Philemon 2).

Paul designated him a fellow soldier (v. 2), for Paul saw Archippus fighting the same spiritual enemies that he was fighting. Certainly these enemies included the evil spirit powers (Ephesians 6:11, 12).

5. What similarities exist between the spiritual battles of Paul's day and our day?

Dear Church

It is significant that Paul included the church as an intended recipient of this letter (Philemon 2). The letter urged Philemon to forgive his runaway slave, Onesimus, who had become a believer. It also informed the church to receive Onesimus and offer him all the blessings of church fellowship. If the church met in Philemon's house and was to receive Onesimus as an active member, then Philemon should publicly receive Onesimus with full forgiveness.

6. Read Colossians 1:12–14. What do these verses say about the cost to God the Father and God the Son of providing forgiveness for us?

Although Paul was restricted as a prisoner, he maintained a constant prayer life, mentioning Christians throughout the world by name and commending them to the grace of God.

Prayers of Thanks

Paul was thankful for Philemon because he had heard good reports about him. Possibly Epaphras, who was with Paul in Rome (Philemon 23) and who had taken news from Colosse to Paul had told Paul about Philemon. These "beloved brothers" in the Lord eagerly desired to share with one another the events of their lives and service for Christ. Having

no phones or e-mail and little mail, personal messengers shuttled from church to the apostle and back bearing tidings.

The reports told Paul of Philemon's "love and faith . . . toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints" (v. 5). Philemon had faith toward the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints. "Saints" in the Bible are all those set apart by faith in Christ, not a special class of super-Christians and certainly not merely dead Christians. Paul specified "all saints," meaning all those with whom Philemon came into contact.

7. How would faith and love play vital roles in Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus, or in any believer's forgiveness of another believer?

Philemon had shown love to all the saints, and Paul wrote, hoping that Philemon would include Onesimus as an object of his love.

8. Record a situation you have faced where faith and love were key in handling the matter.

Prayers of Request

In verses 6 and 7, Paul explained the request he was making to God on behalf of Philemon. Paul's thought in verse 6 is that Philemon's faith in God had led him to accept the needy and to be generous toward them. It would be a tragedy if those who received his fellowship perceived it as mere human kindness. Therefore, Paul prayed that people might come to acknowledge that the character qualities, "every good thing," which moved Philemon to generosity were from Christ. Then they would give glory unto Him. Paul prayed that Philemon's practical love would bring glory to Christ.

9. How will those to whom we show love and kindness discern that Christ deserves the glory for our actions toward them?

Paul possessed the authority of an apostle of Jesus Christ. He could have simply ordered Philemon to receive Onesimus and warned him of the consequences of disobedience. However, Paul chose to appeal to him instead.

10. Read Philemon 8 and 9. What do you think Philemon would be thinking as he reached this point in the letter?

Love Appeal

Paul appealed to Philemon on the basis of love. This love could have been Philemon's love for Paul and Timothy specifically, or his love for believers in general. Ultimately, of course, Philemon's love was the love of God working through him as a believer (Galatians 5:22).

11. Read Philemon 9. How would Paul's mention of his imprisonment impact Philemon?

Cautiously and tactfully, Paul laid the groundwork for asking Philemon to receive back his runaway slave. However, to this point Paul had not mentioned Onesimus by name, or even the specific request for which he was writing. Certainly, Philemon would have been intrigued when he read Paul's words in verses 8 and 9.

"Useful"

Paul delayed using Onesimus' name as long as possible, finally mentioning it a third of the way through his letter. Only after calling him "my son" and again recalling the prison situation in which he had begotten Onesimus does he name the runaway slave.

Before Onesimus was saved ("in time past") he was "unprofitable" (Philemon 11). His service in Philemon's household may have been average or even better, but the quality of his service was overshadowed by his colossal failure in running away.

Now that Onesimus had been saved, he was profitable to both Paul and Philemon. Interestingly, Onesimus' name means "useful." He failed to live up to that name before he became a Christian, but as a Christian he was truly "Onesimus," the useful, profitable one.

Onesimus probably had been serving Paul since the time of his conversion and would have been a great help if Paul had retained him in Rome. He may have reported to Paul the evidences of Philemon's faith and love that he had seen while an unsaved slave in the household.

12. Read Philemon 11. How could Onesimus become useful to Philemon?

The culture of that day believed that a slave was his master's property. Paul, in the spirit of 1 Corinthians 7:21–23, returned Philemon's property. However, the tender affection of Paul for his son in the faith is evident. As Onesimus came to Colosse, it was as though Paul's own heart traveled with him.

In Your Stead

Paul wanted Philemon to know that sending Onesimus back was not a simple decision. Because Paul was very limited due to his house arrest, Onesimus could have served him in many helpful ways. Paul described this potential ministry, not as bond service to which the servant is obligated, but as a service that is beneficial to the one served.

Suppose Paul had kept Onesimus as a servant to himself. Then Paul would have considered Onesimus as serving "in thy [Philemon's] stead" (Philemon 13), since the runaway belonged to Philemon.

13. Read Philemon 13. What great salvation truth is illustrated by "in thy stead" in this situation?

If Onesimus had stayed in Rome serving Paul, his service would have been at Philemon's expense ("thy benefit," v. 14) because Phile-

mon would have lost the service of Onesimus in his own household. Paul would not keep the slave without consultation with and the approval of Philemon. Paul knew if he were to keep Onesimus without first discussing the matter with Philemon, it might appear that Philemon was unwilling. Paul decided to avoid all appearance of coercion (vv. 15, 16).

Onesimus had “departed [only] for a season,” for he was returning (v. 15)—and what a glorious return it was. He returned as a brother in Christ to both Paul and Philemon (v. 16). Philemon should be smitten with a double love for Onesimus—“in the flesh, and in the Lord.”

Paul thought that perhaps God had allowed Onesimus to run away in order to bring him to Himself. Therefore, Paul spoke of the flight in the passive voice as though Onesimus had fulfilled God’s plan in leaving (Philemon 15). Of course, Onesimus would still have been accountable to God for committing such a sinful deed. Since God had not given Paul a special revelation concerning Onesimus’ flight, Paul was not dogmatic. He said that “perhaps” Onesimus departed through the purpose of God.

14. How should Paul’s “perhaps” affect Philemon’s decision to forgive Onesimus?

Surely God was returning the slave, and Philemon should receive him (v. 15). The word “receive” can be used of receiving a payment. Onesimus’ return was God’s payment to Philemon for his faithfulness to the Lord through the whole difficult affair.

At the Heart

In verse 17, Paul boldly asked Philemon to receive Onesimus. If Philemon considered Paul his partner in Christ, he should receive Onesimus as though he were Paul himself.

Paul also took responsibility for his spiritual son’s debts. Paul wrote the promise of payment in his own hand, which would make it binding according to Roman law. However, the indirectness of Paul’s statement about the debt gave Philemon the opportunity to spare Paul from paying.

Before Philemon decided to accept Paul's offer of payment, he should remember two things. First, in some way he, too, was saved as a result of Paul's ministry (v. 19). Second, Paul had just done him a great service by returning his runaway slave as a beloved brother.

15. Read Philemon 20. How could Philemon give Paul great joy and refreshment?

Paul was confident that Philemon would heed his appeal and so obey God (v. 21). In fact, Paul expected him to do even more than receive Onesimus. This "more" could include dismissing the debt without charging it to Paul and granting Onesimus his freedom from slavery.

As Paul brought the letter to a close, he addressed his personal future. He expressed trust that he would be released from bondage in answer to prayer (v. 22). He anticipated a visit to Colosse and even to Philemon's home. Perhaps the very mention of a possible visit by Paul was a gentle nudge to Philemon to do as Paul had asked.

The prayers for Paul's deliverance were not merely the prayers of Philemon but of the believers as a group. Therefore, the letter ends with a reminder that the entire church, not only one man, was in Paul's mind as he wrote. Philemon was on the spot before all the church to walk in the way of righteousness with regard to Onesimus.

Making It Personal

16. Do you need to extend forgiveness to someone?

17. What specific steps should you take?

18. When will you take the first step?

19. Memorize Ephesians 4:32.