

*A Layman's Look At
The Book Of Philemon*

Forgiveness

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A Layman's Look At Philemon

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Introduction

I presume one of the hardest things for a human to do is, when they are offended, to forgive and never bring up the problem again. Far too often though, they will give the token reply of forgiveness, but deep down, you know there is still resentment. I can remember a time when I had offended someone and had written a letter, since I was not in the position where I could go to them in person, and asked forgiveness. The answer I had in return was, "I will forgive, but I will never forget." That, my friend, is in no way forgiveness.

In this short epistle written to a friend, and probably a convert, of Paul, we have a unique look into what true forgiveness is. Here we have Paul, in prison once again, with a visit from a run away slave, and not only a run away, but a thief as well, having taken property that belonged to his master, and eventually who had been converted to Christ, and was now being compelled to return to his owner with a letter by Paul. What occurs after his return can be explained by the very fact that we have this letter as one of the inspired books of the Bible, simply because it shows the true meaning of forgiveness.

In reading this, along with a thorough study of Philemon, it is my wish that you too can find forgiveness of anyone who may have offended you, and see in this all the forgiveness that Jesus Christ Himself had for you and for me.

Jerry W Jones PhD
Psalm 68:11

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Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (vs. 1-3). As was the custom with Paul in all his letters, he opens with identification of himself as the writer, but in this one, opposite of his other epistles, he does not address himself as *an apostle* of the Lord Jesus Christ, but as *a prisoner of Jesus Christ*. He does not regard his imprisonment by the hands of the Roman government as being from them, but by the direct will of God. Then he addresses the intended recipient, a man by the name of Philemon.

This story gives you a bleak background of the slavery market in the days of Paul. In the Roman government, there were approximately sixty million slaves, and it was to be considered a capitol offense, punished by death, when a slave would escape, and equally so for theft. So in sending this letter, Paul was putting the life of Onesimus in jeopardy of his life.

I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus (vs. 4-6). In today's modern vernacular, you would call this "buttering up" Philemon, preparing him for what was coming in the letter. Paul mentions the sincere service of this man, letting him know that he had been in the prayers of Paul. With all the prayers to the saints that Paul had daily, we could wonder when he had time for anything else, but his deep love for the saints compelled him to remember those who had ventured their very lives for the sake of the Gospel. Here is another one who exemplified *good work* for the cause of Christ, not because he was trying to work for his salvation, but because of what the Lord Jesus Christ had done for him on the cross of Calvary. Works are good, when they are in the right place. Consider all the writings by "The Layman" in these epistles. Would any of them earn any points toward getting into Heaven? No, works do not help in one way to "earn" your salvation, for in so doing, if one could work for his or her salvation, then their would be bragging because of what had been accomplished. The only one who will be worthy of bragging, it will be when we stand before Christ and acknowledge that any glory attained will be the glory of the cross through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. He and He alone deserves all the glory and bragging we can pour upon Him.

For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother (v.7). The word *bowels* is a term used that means a

tenderness of the heart; a yearning for fellowship, a desire to be in one's presence. If you can let your imagination take in the scenario of a young man, standing at the door of some young girl of his dreams. It is their first date, and he nervously, with a stomach that is churning from the flow of adrenaline, as he rings the doorbell, and then sees the object of his dreams standing there with a lovely smile on her face.

Or take a different scenario of one who is a Christian and has a tender desire to serve the Lord, and willingly and lovingly takes into his home a traveling evangelist, or a visiting preacher. He yearns to hear more of the Word of God and of the love God has for him. That is the refreshment this man had given to Paul on occasion. It seems he was not one who had been converted by Paul, because he is called a brother, rather than *my son*, a term Paul tenderly used to describe his care for Timothy.

Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ (vs. 8-9). And now comes the reason for this letter. Paul is reminding Philemon of where he, Paul, was at the time, in a Roman dungeon, most likely in shackles, as quite often he had to use an amanuensis to write his letters. Paul tactfully approaches the reason for this letter, and you can imagine the anxiety of Onesimus as he is probably kneeling before Philemon after holding out the letter from Paul.

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly (vs. 10-14). From the Scriptures, we see that Paul was not married, however he did have many sons, not in the flesh but in and through life in Christ Jesus. Here is another that he had *begotten* through salvation. Paul need not to introduce Onesimus, who seemed to be one who was of little use to Philemon before, but now, having been born again, he was returned so that now, through the ministry of the Gospel, Paul is pleading with Philemon to nothing do anything against the slave. He had hoped to keep Onesimus to be of service to himself, but wanted to let Philemon know that instead, he was returning the man, hoping that he would be received willingly.

For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? (vs. 15-16). How can one bring judgment on another, when you find out that he was no longer just a servant, but not a brother in the Lord? He had evidently stolen some property before he left, as we surmise later in this letter, but now has been returned, to willingly work for his master and be more than a servant, but one with Philemon in Christ.

If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides (vs. 17-19). And now, the "fine print" of Paul's letter. "If I am with you in this matter, take him back into your household. In whatever way he had done you wrong, or if he took anything that belonged to you, I will pay to have it replaced. But I

want you to remember that you owe me much more for what I've done for you." Paul must have anticipated that he was going to be released from prison, or else how would he be able to "repay" anything. And what it was that made Philemon indebted to Paul is not mentioned either, but evidently Paul used this point to let this master know he owed a lot more to Paul.

Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord (v. 20). Again, the "σπλαγκνά" of the Scriptures, the "bowels" of mercy as Paul had said to those in Philippi, was his earnest desire that Philemon submit to Paul's request. How can one refuse such a tender plea?

Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say (v. 21). Now the "dagger" is thrust into Philemon's heart. How could he dare refuse, after such confidence given to him by Paul? "I know that you will do far more than I have requested here in this letter."

But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you (v. 22). Here is the reason Paul was sure he would be released. Evidently Philemon had requested and been given permission to take Paul into his own house, and Paul hoped that through the prayers of Philemon, he would soon be in his care and then would know how Philemon had responded to his letter. To show up and see no Onesimus there would have saddened Paul, so now Philemon had the choice; either submit to Paul's request or see Paul hurt to the heart because of any punishment that was thrust on the slave.

There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (vs. 23-25). At the close of Paul's letters, he would mention those who served with him in the Gospel, calling them his ***fellowlabourers*** or sometimes as fellow servants. These were those who traveled with Paul at times and helped him in his ministry to others. Lucas we know as the "beloved physician" who accompanied Paul as his personal doctor, perhaps because of the ***thorn in the flesh*** that would debilitate Paul at times. Epaphras is another that was a minister to the Colossians in their own church. Marcus was he who would write the Gospel of Mark, had left Paul at one time and then was called back in service and profitable to Paul in his ministry. Demas we know would leave Paul, ***having loved this present world*** (Second Timothy 4:10), but evidently at this time was there to help in Paul's ministry.

Then Paul closes out his letter with the admonition of the Lord Jesus Christ and a final "Amen," speaking the truth in the Lord. "So be it."

Conclusion

You may ask why God would choose to have this work be included in the Canon of the Scriptures, and the answer is quite simple. It is an exhortation to us today, as well as it was then, to show forgiveness, whatever may be the cause. If we think of all that our Savior suffered because of our sins, and then recall His call to His heavenly Father to also forgive us, how could we do less? Remember, Jesus said if we will not forgive others, neither would God forgive us. Revenge belongs only to Him, and any vengeance taken on someone must be done by God alone. Simply said, be willing to forgive.