

Biblical Steps to Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an issue everyone deals with more often than we realize. I have found that forgiving is more difficult when the offense is greater, and I suspect that you found that to be true! Sadly, some Christians refuse to forgive whether the offense is small or great; as a result, they are miserable. It is important for us to know that forgiveness reveals our spiritual maturity. The more spiritually mature we are, the easier we will forgive. If you wonder how mature you are, evaluate how easily you forgive. But, whether you are more or less mature, the need to forgive will always be an issue until we go home to heaven. Forgiveness is so important to God that He wrote an entire book about forgiveness, even though the word never appears in the book.

That is the book called Philemon. Our study is the second in a series and is about the biblical steps required for forgiving others.

REVIEW OF THE LAST STUDY IN PHILEMON. Our first study in this series was in Philemon 1-7. In it we discov-

ered three spiritual characteristics that are necessary for true forgiveness. In this study of Philemon 8-25, we will learn the biblical steps to true forgiveness. But before we dig into our study, let me quickly review our last study because I want us to remember the situation about which the apostle Paul was writing.

We have already discovered in verses 1-3 that Philemon had a wife, a son, and a slave named Onesimus. This letter is

concerned about forgiveness for this slave, who had run away from Philemon and his family for unknown reasons. We have learned that the church of Laodicea met in Philemon's home. This means the family and the church would have known that Onesimus had run away! I have wondered how the church reacted to this troubling news. Some believe Philemon may have been the pastor of the church since the church met in his home, but that is not certain. He may have been a lay leader. We have also learned that Onesimus had found the apostle Paul in the Mamertine Prison in Rome.

THREE SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS ESSENTIAL FOR FORGIVENESS. In verses 4-7, the apostle praised Phile-

mon for three spiritual characteristics that are necessary for true forgiveness to occur. First, we are told in verse 5 that Philemon believed in Jesus Christ as his Savior. Second, we are told that he loved the saints in the church. The third characteristic is

found in verse 6. There we learn that Paul had urged Philemon to love the saints in the church even more—as if they were his own family. We learned that true fellowship is not just having a meal together and spending time together. True fellowship is loving others like they are your family. Scripture teaches that every believer is in the family of God, and God the Father is the Father of all believers. But sadly, some Christians are isolationists. They come to church and leave. Others



come to church, do their assigned ministry, but do not reach out beyond those connected to their ministries. Yet, they feel good about themselves because they are serving Jesus. They act like they are not family members. Apparently, Philemon had the same problem. The church met in his home, yet, he was not building relationships with all the saints! So, Paul urged Philemon to give himself greatly to building relationships in the body of Christ.

PAUL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH PHILEMON. Our study today starts with Philemon 8-9. The verses read,

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you — since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus — Philemon 8-9 (NASB)

When Paul said that he had enough confidence in Christ to order Philemon, the Greek word Paul used for confidence is *parresia*, which literally means “bold” or “open.” That is, Paul said he was so bold that he would not have any difficulty commanding Philemon to do what is “fitting,” but he wanted to appeal to Philemon for “love’s sake” instead. Now we will have to wait until verse 17 to learn what Paul means by “love’s sake.”

Next, Paul gave Philemon three reasons for appealing to him instead of commanding him. First, Paul said he was an apostle. Second, Paul said he was an older man. We believe that Paul was about sixty years old at this time. Third, Paul was a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Now any one of these three would have been sufficient to motivate Philemon to do “what was proper.” But why did Paul add these comments? Was Paul applying pressure to Philemon to motivate him to obey? Was Paul trying to get Philemon to do something that he did not want to do? I do not think so. Paul was just listing several possible wrong motivations that might have moved Philemon to action. I believe that Paul did not want Philemon to simply do “what was considered to be proper” because of any of those three facts. Paul wanted Philemon to act out of a heart of love. Paul was saying do what is proper for the right reason — for the sake of love!

PAUL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ONESIMUS. Starting with verse 10, Paul now shares some important facts about Onesimus.

Paul is getting ready to make his request that Philemon forgive his runaway slave. So, he finally mentions Onesimus in verses 10-11. He says,

I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. Philemon 10-11 (NASB)

Paul may have surprised Philemon when he mentioned Onesimus' name. If so, we can imagine the wide range of emotions that Philemon may have felt when he read this letter. We do not know how he responded. Maybe Philemon rejoiced that he now knew that Onesimus was in Rome with Paul. Maybe Philemon thought that Paul would order his slave to return home. It is also possible that Philemon may have begun to wonder if Onesimus had criticized him. The slave ran away for some reason. I think Philemon may have begun to wonder why Paul was writing this letter.

Next, we need to notice that Paul called Onesimus “my child.” With those words Philemon learned that God had used Paul to present the gospel of Jesus Christ, and Onesimus had responded by believing in Jesus as his Savior. That is why Paul called him “my child.” Paul was his spiritual father.

When Paul said that Onesimus was “formerly . . . useless,” he could have meant that Onesimus had been a lazy or a problem slave. Maybe Onesimus had been an unhappy slave who constantly complained and was not very productive. We do not know the specifics of what Paul meant, but whatever Paul meant, Onesimus had been transformed. Onesimus was now useful. I would imagine that Paul had taught him that Christians are to serve their masters or employers for the Lord's sake (Ephesians 6:5-6; Colossians 3:22; 1 Timothy 6:1). What is clear is that Paul wanted Philemon to know that Onesimus had a different heart attitude toward Philemon and his family. Onesimus had been transformed by the Holy Spirit!

PAUL'S LOVE FOR ONESIMUS. In verse 12, Paul revealed that he, himself, loved Onesimus.

I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but

without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. Philemon 12-14 (NASB)

Here Paul said that he had sent Onesimus back to Philemon, even though Paul wanted for him to stay in Rome. When Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, he felt like he was like sending his own heart. Paul was very emotional when he wrote these words. The Greek word that Paul used for “very heart” is *splanchnon*. It literally means “bowels” or “entrails.” It is the word the Jews used to express a deep emotion for someone. So Paul said that he was sending back his “bowels” — this was a difficult act. Yet, he sent Onesimus back anyway because Paul wanted Philemon to act by his “own free will.” Paul wanted Philemon’s act of “goodness” or act of love to be by his own choice. Philemon must want to do that!

GREAT IMPORTANCE OF FORGIVENESS. Now I am sure that someone might think that Paul made a grave mistake by sending this runaway slave back. They might argue that Paul should have kept the runaway slave and rebuked Philemon for even having a slave. But such thinking reveals that they missed four important points.

First, slavery in the Roman Empire was different than the abusive slavery that occurred in the United States and other countries in more recent centuries. By the time of the New Testament, slaves were born into slavery and Rome was no longer acquiring slaves by warfare. The attitude towards slaves was changing. Slaves were “often better than freemen.”¹ “Many could be doctors, musicians, teachers, artists, librarians and accountants.”² “By the first century, freedom from slavery could be purchased, owners granted an inheritance to their slaves, and slaves could be freed after seven to twenty years. When an owner died, slaves were frequently set free.”³ Slavery in the Roman Empire, during the New Testament era, was very different from what usually comes to mind.

The second point is that the gospel is not intended to transform cultures, but the hearts of men and women. Yet, when

hearts are transformed, a culture may change! Some Christian ministries have failed to understand that. So, they try to impose biblical morality on the culture. Every time this is attempted, unbelievers respond in anger. Then the gospel becomes more offensive, but not because of Christ. It is more offensive because ungodly people do not want to be forced to be godly. If Paul and the apostles had attempted to impose biblical standards on the Roman Empire, the result would have been devastating. The empire was already in an uproar with them due to the preaching of the gospel.

The third point is that Philemon could have refused to return, but he did not refuse. He returned. The fourth point is that Onesimus went back because a correct response, forgiveness, was more important than freedom. This letter demonstrates the very great importance of forgiveness. Forgiveness was so important that Onesimus left Rome, Italy and went to Colossae in Asia Minor without knowing how his master would respond.

DIVINE PERSPECTIVE ABOUT ONESIMUS’ BEHAVIOR. Then Paul gave Philemon a divine perspective about Onesimus. He said in verses 15-16,

For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. Philemon 15-16 (NASB)

Paul’s point is that God may have allowed or orchestrated events so that Onesimus could run away in order for Philemon to grow in his Christian walk. This means that if Philemon was offended in any way, he should have considered that perhaps God wanted this to happen. The same is true for us today. When we are offended, we should quickly realize that God is in control. We should realize that even offenses are a growth opportunity. It is a test of our love for the other saints and of our spiritual maturity. Onesimus was now a Christian. His salvation was worth everything that happened.

FIRST STEP — FORGIVENESS IS A CHOICE. In the next three verses Paul now appeals to Philemon to forgive Onesimus. There are three important steps to biblical forgiveness

1. John MacArthur. Colossians & Philemon. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Moody Press. 1992. p. 205.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

that we need to notice. The first step is found in verse 17.

*If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.
Philemon 17 (NASB)*

The Greek grammar indicates that the answer to Paul's question, "If then you regard me a partner" is, "Yes!" They had a close relationship. When Paul said "accept him as you would me," he meant that Philemon should love and respect Onesimus just as he did Paul. Paul was urging Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Paul knew that because of their relationship, Philemon would forgive Paul. That reminds us of 1 Peter 4:8, which says,

... love covers a multitude of sins. 1 Peter 4:8 (NASB)

I have found that when we love others, we forgive them quickly. That is Paul's point. He was to forgive Onesimus as he would Paul. Pardon the offense!

Now, notice that Paul did not tell Philemon to write a strong or angry letter to Onesimus about how Onesimus had hurt Philemon. I knew a man who once counseled a believer to share his hurt feelings with someone who had offended him. That was supposed to result in forgiveness when the other person felt guilty. But Paul did not urge him to do that. Nor did Paul urge Philemon to wait for Onesimus to repent and cry. Notice what Paul did. He appealed to Philemon to choose to forgive. Just as he said earlier, Paul appealed to Philemon's free will to "accept him." He appealed to his mind and not his feelings. Unfortunately, we tend to think with our emotions. We do not feel like forgiving and so we don't. But Paul's point is that we must decide to forgive with our minds. This reveals the first biblical step to forgiveness is a choice. Forgiveness is not the absence of an emotion, but a decision of the will.

Matthew 18:21-22 also teaches us that forgiveness is a choice. In this passage we are told that Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone. It is obvious that he thought forgiving a person seven times was wonderful, but Jesus said Peter should be willing to forgive seventy times seven or four hundred and ninety times! Usually, we become excited about forgiving so many times, but we miss the obvi-

ous. Jesus is appealing to our minds to choose to forgive. He is not appealing to our hurting emotions that want revenge! You see, forgiveness is a choice!

In Colossians 3:12-13, believers are told,

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Colossians 3:12-13 (NASB)

The NASB is not the best translation. The ESV is more accurate. It says, "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." Notice that Christians must forgive. This means if we choose to not forgive we have sinned. Since Christ forgave us, it is unthinkable that a Christian will not forgive! Christians must choose to forgive!

SECOND STEP — FORGIVENESS MUST BE WITHOUT CONDITIONS. The second step to forgiveness is given in Philemon 18-19. It says,

But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Philemon 18-19 (NASB)

Here Paul urged Philemon to forgive Onesimus without any conditions. Paul said, "If he has wronged you in any way . . . charge that to my account." Again, the Greek grammar assumes the answer to the "if" question is "Yes!" That is, Onesimus did wrong Philemon and his family in some way, but we are not told what he did. Then Paul urges Philemon to forgive him for whatever he did. This is in sharp contrast to what occurs in the hearts of some Christians. Because of hurt feelings, some pray that God will hurt the offender in some way.

I want to quickly add that some teach that if you have been offended then you should wait for the offender to come to you, repent, and beg for your forgiveness. They quote Matthew 18:15 which says,

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault . . . Mat-

thew 18:15 (NASB)

But they miss the fact that the words “against you” are not in the best manuscripts and, therefore, they should not exist in our Bibles. Further, Matthew 18:15-18 is actually about church discipline — how to help someone caught in a habit of sin. It is not teaching us to confront someone and urge them to repent and beg for our forgiveness. Confronting people is a form of revenge, unless it is part of church discipline.

When Paul said, “I will repay it, and not Onesimus” he made the point that Philemon must forgive Onesimus fully and completely. This gives us the second step to forgiveness which is that forgiveness must be without conditions.

In Matthew 5:39-44 Jesus gives us the same principle. He said,

But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . . “
Matthew 5:39-44 (NASB)

The immediate principle is that we are not to seek revenge. Instead of revenge, we are to love even an evil person. Jesus emphasized love, because it leads to forgiveness. Forgiveness is the proof that love exists within the heart. That is why Paul praised Philemon for his love of the saints and then challenged him to seek a closer love relationship with them. He needed to love Philemon because he was part of the family of God—the saints.

THIRD STEP — FORGIVENESS IS AN ACT OF LOVE FOR CHRIST’S SAKE. The third step of forgiveness is in verse 20.

Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Philemon 20 (NASB)

Then Paul added that Philemon was to forgive for Christ’s

sake. Unfortunately, many Christians have accepted the secular world’s motivation for forgiving others. The world says forgiveness will keep you out of the psychiatric hospital. Or, we are to forgive for our own happiness, so that we feel better, or so we can sleep at night.

Someone has said that, “Causing an injury puts you below your enemy; revenging an injury makes you even with him; forgiving an injury sets you above him.”⁴

But that statement appeals to our pride. Sadly, Christians have accepted these as good reasons to forgive, but you cannot find any of these in Scripture. We need to see that Paul has given Christians the real reason to forgive, and he has done it twice. We are to forgive because of love for Christ’s sake. This gives us the third step in forgiveness. Forgiveness is an act of love for Christ’s sake.

Do you remember what Jesus said during the final moments of His death on the cross? Listen to His words in Luke 23:34,

But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34 (NASB)

Now ask yourself, what was the crowd, the Pharisees, and the soldiers doing when Jesus was on the cross? The answer is they were cheering His death. They were not repenting or apologizing. They were not sorry or remorseful. Yet Jesus said, “Father, forgive them.” When Jesus forgave them, He proved that He loved them. He did not require any response from the offender. In Acts 7:59-60, we are told that Stephen, the first martyr, did the same thing while the religious leaders were stoning him. This helps us understand that forgiveness between individuals in this life is a choice. It does not matter what they did or are doing to us. Thirdly, as an act of love, Christians must forgive because Jesus did.

I rejoice that God has given us the book of Philemon. It is an example of the spiritual characteristics necessary for forgiveness and the biblical steps about how to forgive. I think Ephesians 4:31-32 summarizes it well. It says,

4. F. W. Borcham. *The Other Side of the Hill*. Epworth Press. 1917, p. 240.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (NASB)

There is no room for a lack of forgiveness by a Christian.

CONCLUSION. Verses 21-25 close the book of Philemon. Paul wrote,

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 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. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philemon 21-25 (NASB)

These closing words are warm and reveal Philemon and Paul had a personal relationship. But what is missing is that we are not told in so many words that Philemon forgave Onesimus. But I believe that Paul gave us the answer when he told Philemon that he was “Confident of your obedience . . . knowing that you will do even more than I say.” Philemon would forgive Onesimus. There is another reason why we believe Philemon forgave Onesimus. It is found in the Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians, which was written by the early church fathers (A.D. 30-107). In his letter Ignatius referred to Onesimus as the pastor of that church.⁵ We believe that this is the same Onesimus mentioned in the book of Philemon since he would have been a pastor about thirty to forty years later after John. This is a glowing testimony to Philemon’s decision to forgive unconditionally as an act of love for Christ’s sake. With time the emotional hurt will disappear as we walk in the Spirit because the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy and peace.

I would like to add that if you are struggling with forgiveness, start by confessing your lack of forgiveness as a sin. Then ask God to help you love that person and to fill you with the Holy Spirit. Then thank God for answering your prayer.

I would like to conclude with a true life story from the life

of the missionary, Rosalind Goforth.

In her autobiographical book, *Climbing*, missionary Rosalind Goforth tells of the internal rage she harbored against someone who had greatly harmed her and her husband, Jonathan. It was a serious injury which the couple would never afterward talk about, but while Jonathan seemed to easily forgive the offender, Rosalind refused to do so.

For more than a year, she would not talk to nor recognize that person who lived near them on their missionary station in China; four years passed and the matter remained unresolved and, to an extent, forgotten.

One day the Goforths were traveling by train to a religious meeting elsewhere in China. For months, Rosalind had felt a lack of power in her Christian life and ministry, and in her train compartment she bowed her head and cried to God to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Unmistakably clear came the Inner Voice, “Write to (the one toward whom I felt hatred and unforgiveness) and ask forgiveness for the way you have treated him.” My whole soul cried out “Never!” Again I prayed as before, and again the Inner Voice spoke clearly as before. Again I cried out in my heart, “Never; never. I will never forgive him!” When for the third time this was repeated, I jumped to my feet and said to myself, “I’ll give it all up, for I’ll never, never forgive!”

One day afterward, Rosalind was reading to the children from *Pilgrim’s Progress*. It was the passage in which a man in a cage moans, “I have grieved the Spirit, and He is gone: I have provoked God to anger, and He has left me.” Instantly a terrible conviction came upon her, and for two days and nights she felt in terrible despair.

Finally, talking late at night with a fellow missionary, a young widower, she burst into sobs and told him the whole story. “But Mrs. Goforth,” he said, “are you willing to write the letter?”

At length she replied, “Yes.”

5. 5 Ignatius. *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesus*. Chapter 1. Ante-Nicene Fathers. Hendrickson. 1995. vol. 1, p. 49. Also, *The Second Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesus*. Chapter 1. Ante-Nicene Fathers. Hendrickson. 1995. vol. 1, p. 101.

“Then go at once and write it.”

Rosalind jumped up, ran into the house, and wrote a few lines of humble apology for her actions, without any reference to his. The joy and peace of her Christian life returned.⁶

Is there someone you struggle forgiving? Then you are living in sin. It is time to confess your sin of not forgiving. Then ask the Holy Spirit to take control of your life and a) lovingly forgive, b) without any conditions and do it for Christ's sake. Glorify Jesus and enjoy love within the family of God.

6. Rosalind Goforth. Climbing: Memories of a Missionary's Wife. Sword Book Club. 1940. pp.99-102.