

Philemon

A Study in Forgiveness

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Part 1: 10 Study Guides

Part 2: 11 Sermons

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How This Study Works

This study guide follows an *inductive* approach. To study inductively simply means that your goal is to find the meaning that the author intended. This means we are ultimately trying to figure out what God meant, as He is the Ultimate Author of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21-22). There are 3 steps in the inductive approach.

1. Observation. We ask the question: *What does it say?* Ask the 5 “W”s and How questions.
2. Interpretation. We ask the question: *What does it mean?*
3. Application. This is where we ask: *What do I do now?* How do I change?

The questions in this study will be based on these 3 steps.

Part 1

Inductive Study Guide to Philemon

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Study Guide
Philemon, #1

1. Read through the letter once. Write down any first thoughts you have.
2. Who wrote this letter (v1)?
3. What are the names of those with Paul (v1, 23-24)?
4. What is the name of the person Paul is writing to primarily (v1b)? Based on what you read in the letter what kind of guy is Philemon?
5. Who else does Paul want to see this letter (v2)?
6. After reading this letter what seems to be the issue brought up (v15-16, 18)?
7. What is Paul asking Philemon to do (v17)?
8. Is there anybody in your life who has hurt you that you have not forgiven?

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Philemon #2

1. How does Paul present himself in verse 1?
2. In what other verses does Paul allude to his imprisonment?
3. Take a couple minutes and read the introductions in Paul's other letters. In what other ways does Paul present himself in other letters (*Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*)?
4. Paul and Philemon had a good friendship (v4, 5, 7, 19-20, 22). How do you think Philemon might have felt picturing his friend in chains?
5. If Philemon sympathized with Paul do you think he might be more willing to do what Paul asks? Why?
6. Paul sacrificed his freedom for the Gospel (see also Acts 21:13). What sacrifice was Philemon facing?
7. In what way is forgiveness a "sacrifice"?
8. Are there any similar sacrifices you need to make for the Gospel?

1. Who else does Paul address this letter to in verse 2?
2. Many believe that Apphia was Philemon's wife. Why do you think Paul would want to address her too?
3. Look up the following passages and write down whether these wives were helpful or hurtful to their husbands
 - a. Genesis 3:1-6
 - b. Genesis 16:1-6
 - c. Exodus 4:24-26
 - d. Proverbs 31:11-12
 - e. Judges 16:4-21
 - f. Job 2:7-10
 - g. 1 Samuel 25:1-35
4. Describe how important is it to be/have a godly wife?
5. Next Paul mentions a man named Archippus. Many believe that he was the pastor of the church that met in Philemon's home. Read Colossians 4:17 and write down if you believe this could be true.
6. What might Paul want Archippus to do in Philemon's situation as his pastor? (See Hebrews 13:7, 17)
7. Do you believe that as a Christian the people you surround yourself with will either help you or hurt you in living for Christ? (See Proverbs 13:20 and 1 Corinthians 15:33)
8. At this time, do you believe you are making the best choices about who you spend your time with? Who in your life could you be more intentional about spending time with to help you grow as a Christian?

1. In verse 4 Paul says he thanks God for Philemon. What 2 reasons does he give for why he is thankful in verse 5 and 7?
2. Read the last part of Galatians 5:6. How are faith and love related?
3. How would you describe your love for Christians? (*See Paul's affection in Philippians 1:7-8*)
4. Paul tells Philemon that he prays for him in verse 6. What is that Paul prays for?

Note: This verse refers primarily to the fellowship among Christians. We are made rich in Christ through faith and out of those spiritual riches (Eph. 1:3) we are to share with each other what we've received from the Lord. In other words, we show what we've been given by giving it to others.

5. According to verse 6 what would be the result if Philemon shared his faith? (*see also Colossians 2:2-3*)
6. Do you think you can understand Jesus Christ while not living the way He says to? Or do you think there is a relationship between “reading” and “doing”? Explain your answer.

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Philemon, #5

1. Read verse 8. Why could Paul “be bold” and command Philemon to forgive Onesimus? (see 2 Corinthians 13:10)
2. Rather than using his authority, how does Paul appeal to Philemon in verse 9?
3. Read Proverbs 25:15. When do you think it is better to be gentle instead of harsh to persuade someone?
4. In verse 10 how does Paul want Philemon to see Onesimus?
5. How would seeing him this way help Philemon forgive Onesimus?
6. Is there someone in your life you need to see in a new light to help you forgive them?
7. In verse 11 Paul says Onesimus is now useful. In what ways would he be useful to Philemon now (see verses 15-16 too)
8. Read 1 Corinthians 12:7, 12-27; Ephesians 4:11-16; . Describe what the Bible indicates about the usefulness of each believer.
9. Describe your usefulness to the Body of Christ based on these passages.

1. Why do you think Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon to be his slave again?
2. What instructions does the NT give Christian slaves (Col. 3:22-25; 1 Peter 2:18; 1 Corinthians 7:20-24)?
3. Why would it have been wrong for Onesimus to refuse to return to his master?
4. Do you think that when someone is forgiven for their sins it means they have a license to sin? (Romans 6:1; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Peter 1:14-16)
5. What does it say about Onesimus' that he would willingly go back to the master he ran away from (2 Cor. 7:10-11; Col. 3:22-25)?
6. How has Jesus Christ transformed your desire to do what's right?

1. How does Paul hope Philemon's "favor" would be in verse 14? How does he hope it will not be?
2. What should (and shouldn't) motivate you to forgive people?
3. What is Paul getting at in verse 15?
4. How have you seen God at work in your difficult circumstances?
5. How does Paul describe Onesimus in verse 16? How does this compare to the way Paul described Philemon in verse 1b and 7b?
6. How might the knowledge that Onesimus was now a Christian changed Philemon's view of him? (Or impacted his willingness to forgive him?)
7. Look up the following verses and list the different categories of people. What does Paul say about these differences? What do you think he is getting at?
 - a. 1 Corinthians 12:13
 - b. Galatians 3:28
 - c. Colossians 3:11

1. How does Paul want Philemon to welcome Onesimus according to verse 17? (see also Romans 15:7)
2. In verse 18 what does Paul want to be “charged” to himself?

Imputation means “*to charge to someone’s account*”. Our sins were imputed to Christ and God’s righteousness was imputed to us. This does not mean Jesus actually became a sinner, nor does it mean we actually become righteous. It simply means to be credited with.

3. How would it help Philemon to forgive Onesimus if he “charged” Onesimus’ offense to Paul?
4. How do you think this idea of imputation can help you forgive?
5. In what way would it affect Paul if Philemon did what Paul was requesting (verse 20)?
6. Based on verse 21 what was Paul anticipating Philemon would do?
7. What does this say about the reputation Philemon had? (See verses 4-7 again also)

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Study Guide
Philemon #9

1. Who is with Paul? List everyone you see in verses 23 and 24. (Don't forget verse 1 also!)
2. Read Acts 15:36-40. This argument happened more than 12 years earlier. Who is the argument about? According to verse 24 where is that person now?
3. Read 2 Timothy 4:11. How is Paul's attitude towards Mark different so many years later? (This passage was written about 64AD, whereas Mark deserted Paul around 48AD).
4. What does this indicate about the role forgiveness has in restoring a fellow believer after a failure? In other words, why is forgiveness important for the process of restoration?

1. Demas is mentioned again in 2 Timothy 4:10. (Second Timothy was written about 2 years after Philemon). What did Demas do? Why did he do it?
2. Paul is at the end of his life and has experienced a lot of abandonment (Acts 15:36-40; 2 Timothy 1:17; 4:10). Do you think Paul had learned to forgive the way he was asking Philemon to forgive?
3. Can you anticipate all the ways people are going to wrong you in your life?
4. In what ways can you “prepare” yourself to forgive people before you are actually wronged by them?
5. Who do you still need to forgive? At the end of this study on forgiveness, if someone has been coming to your mind that you feel the Lord is leading you to forgive, then do not wait any longer. It is the perfect way to end a study on forgiveness. As a matter of fact, taking that kind of action is the goal of this study.

Part 2
Sermons in Philemon

Philemon v1-3

The interview began with these words: “It was Charlie.” In October of 2006 a 32 year old man walked into an Amish school in Lancaster PA and shot 10 schoolgirls, killing 5, before shooting himself. As the Emergency Response rushed to the school, and while helicopters and sirens were heard in the town, and while her phone was ringing non-stop, Terri Roberts with tears in her eyes looked at her husband and said, “It was Charlie.” Charlie was their son.

In an interview with CBS in 2013 Terri said her first reaction was that they had to move. But she shared that on the same day as the shooting the Amish community came to her and said they wanted her to stay. One article describes the details of how the Amish continued to reach out. They immediately forgave the killer. The Amish mourners who attended the killer’s funeral are said to have outnumbered the non-Amish mourners. They

This story leads us to another story. The story of Philemon. And though Philemon’s story is not tragic like that of this Amish community, like the Amish community Philemon had the choice to forgive or not to forgive. To forgive, or, not to forgive. Turn to the book of Philemon and let’s look at Philemon’s story.

Philemon was a Christian man from the city of Colossae, who was saved because of the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Philemon was also a wealthy man because his house was big enough for a church congregation to meet in and he owned at least one slave. It is this slave that our story turns. His name was Onesimus and one day he stole some money from Philemon and ran away. Once he escaped he made it all the way to Rome. While in Rome trying to “get lost” in the busyness of Rome’s capital, he ran into none other than the Apostle Paul, who was himself under arrest and awaiting trial. Paul the great evangelist led Onesimus to faith in Christ and the slave became free in the truest sense – “free from his sins”. Jesus said, “***the truth will set you free. If the Son sets you free you are free indeed.***”

Somehow it came to light afterwards that Paul had in front of him a runaway slave belonging to a man he knew personally. The right thing for Onesimus to do was go back to his master, Philemon. After staying with Paul and helping Paul minister for a time, Paul sent Onesimus back, but not empty handed. Paul wrote a personal letter to Philemon appealing to him as a friend. He asked him to forgive Onesimus all wrong, and accept him back not as a slave, but, as a fellow brother in Christ. So you can imagine the look on Philemon’s face

as his prodigal slave stood before him, truly sorry, and as he read these words of the Apostle Paul. [Read]

Philemon is a book that has multiple themes woven together in it. We are going to witness how far Christian forgiveness should reach. We are going to learn to rejoice over the repentance of someone who has offended us. We are going to stand in awe of the unpredictable providence of God. Because this letter spotlights the issue of slavery in ancient Rome, we are going to see how God expects us to live for Christ within an ungodly social system. We are going to watch what it means for someone to have the courage in their new faith to do what is right in the eyes of God, even in the face of great risk. We are going to be taught by an excellent example how to be someone else's advocate.

Let's look at verse 1 and see Paul the Prisoner.

Paul the Prisoner (v1a)

Look at how Paul opens up this personal letter, "***Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...***" It was customary in that day to start with your name when you wrote a letter, not end with it like we do today. Notice the very important way that Paul describes himself, "***a prisoner of Christ Jesus.***" He doesn't use his apostolic title like he does in most his letters, "Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ". Why? Because he was not using his authority as an Apostle in this situation. He was not issuing a command down from his elevated authority. He was speaking to a dear friend and making an appeal on the basis of love – not authority.

But the appellation was deeper than just avoiding an authoritative stance. Paul was a prisoner of Christ. He was serving Christ by preaching the Gospel and saving souls. That preaching led to his current imprisonment. Two points stand out to me that I think were not lost on Philemon:

First, he was personally led to salvation by Paul's preaching not too long ago. Now, in an amazing act of providence God used the same man to lead his runaway slave to salvation.

Secondly, Philemon would have seen that Paul was willing to go to prison for Christ so people could be set free from their sins. Would Philemon set Onesimus free by forgiving him?

This highlights the expanded theme of freedom in this letter. 1) The picture of Paul in chains no doubt aroused a desire in Philemon for him to be released. Certainly Paul hoped this would put Philemon in a frame of mind to set

Onesimus free. 2) Onesimus set free from his crimes against Philemon. 3) Maybe even set free from slavery. 4) Onesimus now had freedom in Christ, “If the Son sets you free you are free indeed”, John 8:36. 5) The freedom put before Philemon: freedom from bitterness through forgiveness.

This presents us with some important applications. First, Paul’s willingness to sacrifice his freedom for the sake of the Gospel should make us pause and consider our own sacrifice for the Gospel. Second, is there someone in our life that we need to set free through forgiveness? Are we a prisoner to our anger and resentment? **“Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”** (Colossians 3:13).

Philemon the Faithful (v1b-2)

Philemon was a faithful Christian. Notice verse 1b, **“To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker.”** Philemon’s name means “beloved”, or “affection”; A fitting name for someone who can be described as a *dear friend*. He was no doubt a loved man who many of the Christians had deep affection for. Certainly one reason he was dear to many was he opened his home up for the church to meet there (v2). As a fellow worker he did whatever he could to **“refresh the hearts of the saints”** (v7). Paul was greatly encouraged thinking about him as he says in verse 4-5, **“I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.”** We only see the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the reasons why Philemon was so beloved. He was a faithful Christian.

Now Paul, knowing his dear friend’s faithfulness, was going to ask him to go further in his faith. He was asking him to forgive a serious crime committed against him by his slave Onesimus. It raises up for us two important points.

First, as Christians we are never to withhold forgiveness. Forgiveness should be a defining trait in the Christian life. Ephesians 4:32 says, **“Be kind and compassionate towards one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”** While no one would say forgiveness is easy, it is something that is both encouraged and expected of us. The repeat offender is to be forgiven (Matthew 18:22-23). The big sins are to be forgiven (1 Timothy 1:15-16). The little day-to-day annoyances are to be forgiven (Eph. 4:2). Forgiveness is not to be withheld and our Lord warns of the consequences (Matthew 6:14-15).

Second, we are to get even better at the things we do well in our Christian walk. We are to go from “okay” to “good” to “really good” to “excellent” in our Christian virtues. Never are we to say, “I’m doing that good enough”. Listen to

Paul's words to the Thessalonians "***We instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.***" (1 Thess. 4:1). Then in verse 10 speaking of loving other Christians he says, "***And in fact you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.***" He wasn't saying they were doing poorly. In fact he commended them for how well they were doing and wanted them to keep going. The more we press on the more we are urged to keep going. The things we are doing well we are told to get even better at. Philemon was a man who wanted to live for Christ and reach others for Christ. Here he had an opportunity to grow into greater Christian maturity by forgiving.

The Gracious Greeting (v3)

Lastly we see the Gracious Greeting, "***Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***" We are bound together with many things as believers, but two important bonds are mentioned here: grace and peace. Paul wasn't just slapping in some cliché for a salutation. His whole approach to Christians was from the view of grace and peace. We all have the grace and peace of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. God has given us His grace and He is at peace with us who have come to Him through Jesus Christ.

But that's not all. These two – grace and peace – should stand out in the fellowship of Christians. The rules that govern us should be grace and peace. The quality of our relationships should be fragrant with these virtues. Underlying our willingness to live by these virtues is the realization we have that this is how God lives with us. The question from this letter then is this: was Philemon going to let grace and peace govern his heart towards Onesimus?

Conclusion:

Terri Robertson said that on the day her son committed that horrible tragedy she was visited by the father and mother of 2 girls killed that day. They came to offer their comfort to her. She said in her interview, "Wow. Is there anything in this life that we can't forgive?"

Philemon, verse 2

Turn to 2 Corinthians 2. While you are turning there I will tell you a story. It was a different Sunday than usual. The leaders stood up and rather than a sermon that morning they read a lengthy letter to all of us in the church. Nobody made a sound as every ear heard every word that the leaders read out loud. Even the babies were quiet. There had been trouble in our church – big troubles. Some of us didn't know what we were going to do. But one man did. It was the man who originally founded our church and led us to believe in Jesus Christ. It was the man who had written the letter we were now listening to. His name was Paul, and he was what is called an "Apostle of Jesus Christ".

This was his second letter to us in less than a year and the first one had sent shockwaves throughout the church. Had we all not been absolutely convinced of his deep love for us, I am sure the severity and sternness with which he wrote last year would have had a very negative effect. But, after the leaders had read that first letter our church was changed for the better. We started doing what he told us to do. I guess tough love can go a long way to help people get back on track – and we needed it. Apparently he heard we were following his first letter because now we sat in church that morning listening to his follow up letter. He was commending us and expressing his love for us again.

One of the biggest changes we made that stands out to me was when we had to follow Paul's instruction to put a guy out of our fellowship. I won't name his name, but, everyone knows him. He had done something very heinous, I won't name what he did, but Paul said in his first letter that even the pagans would be shocked over his behavior – which is saying something. It was hard to do but after he wouldn't acknowledge what he did the man was forbidden from attending church and we stopped socializing with him altogether. He had nobody. We all felt for him, but, we knew we had to do it.

It was one of those situations in life where you say you wouldn't want to go through it again but you wouldn't change a thing because the results were amazing. The man had a change of heart. He realized what he did and was truly sorry – we could all see it. But now our problem was we weren't sure what to do with him. Do we let him back in or keep him out? Do we start having him over for get togethers again or do we continue to keep separated from him? Can we accept his friend on FB yet? Thankfully, Paul wrote this 2nd letter to us in Corinth. In it he tells us what to do with this repentant man. Let's listen in as the leaders read this portion of 2 Corinthians 2:5-11....[Read]

What does this have to do with Philemon? Just like the Corinthians were in a position to forgive, Philemon was also in a position to forgive. But it wasn't just Philemon that Paul had in mind. Just like the whole church at Corinth was instructed in what to do with the man in their midst, Paul speaks to many more people beyond Philemon regarding what to do with the man Onesimus in their midst. Today we are going to ask and answer the question: "*Why does Paul include all these other people in this issue when it seemed primarily an issue between Philemon, Onesimus and Paul?*"

Well as we meet each person you will see why Paul included them.

Apphia

Paul wants to get the right people involved in this issue. First we see a woman named "Apphia", whom Paul refers to as "*our sister.*" I agree with many commentators that this would have been Philemon's wife. For one thing, she wouldn't have been a church leader or pastor because Paul taught that men were to occupy those roles. Since she is mentioned, and mentioned immediately after Philemon, it seems logical that she was his wife. As his wife she had a definite interest in Onesimus returning. Let me offer 2 important points here

First, in that day the wife had charge of the slaves. The day to day running of the home was managed by the wife and this included overseeing the household slaves. Onesimus was not only returning to Philemon, but to Apphia. Therefore, Apphia's attitude towards Onesimus would be just as important – if not more important than Philemon's. And since Onesimus would probably see her more than he would Philemon, she potentially could make his life miserable.

The second reason Paul would have addressed Apphia is because of her influence on Philemon. Behind every good man of God is an even better woman of God. As a general rule, when men are great, usually they have a *Proverbs 31 kind of women* behind them. Apphia would have no doubt been a very supportive and helpful partner with her husband in all that he did for the church. She may have been the one who coaxed Philemon into opening the home to the church, probably also hosting travelling missionaries, and providing support to people in need. If Apphia was this kind of devoted and godly wife, then Paul may have counted on her being gracious and forgiving, and her influence would be crucial to win her husband's forgiveness of Onesimus.

Application: Wives, do you help your husbands make godly choices or hinder them? Can you be trusted to approach life decisions from a Biblical, Christ-honoring perspective? I choose to believe that Apphia was someone Paul

saw as a key player in swaying Philemon to doing the godly thing that Paul was asking.

Archippus

Next we see after Apphia Paul includes a man named Archippus. Paul calls him, “*our fellow soldier.*” Some have said that this is Philemon and Apphia’s son, but, I agree with many others who see him as the pastor of the church that met in Philemon’s home. Archippus was much more likely to be the guy who was teaching God’s word, leading the congregation, caring for the flock and doing the work of pastoral ministry. Why do I believe that? Three reasons.

First of all, his placement here in the introduction suggests it. The fact that Archippus is specifically mentioned by name means he must have had some important role to play in the life of that church. If he is the pastor, it makes sense for him to be mentioned after Philemon and his wife as they are the ones primarily offended by Onesimus. But notice that Archippus is mentioned before the church at large, indicating a leadership position. Paul’s attention goes from Philemon’s household to the household of God – the Church. He addresses Philemon as the leader of his own home, and, then Archippus as the leader of God’s church that met in Philemon’s home.

Secondly, Paul calls him a “*fellow soldier*”. Paul only uses the phrase “*fellow soldier*” to refer to official, recognized church leaders who work hard at their jobs. Epaphroditus was a missionary sent by the Philippians to help Paul while in prison. He said of him in Philippians 2:25, “*I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier.*” In 2 Timothy 2:3 Paul gives advice to his pastoral pupil Timothy, “*Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.*” And I believe when Paul calls Archippus a “fellow soldier” it is because he was the pastor of the church meeting in Philemon’s home.

But while these reasons suggest Archippus is the pastor, it is Colossians 4:17 that I believe makes it certain. In Colossians 4:17 Archippus is mentioned specifically, and he is mentioned in a way that strongly suggests he was entrusted with some official ministry responsibility and position. [Turn to Colossians 4:17] Remember that Paul wrote Colossians at the same time he wrote Philemon (probably Colossians first then Philemon), and, that this whole group of people (Philemon, Onesimus, Apphia, Archippus, etc) are all from the area of Colosse. At the end of his letter to Colossians, Paul is mentioning many people by name with little notes for them. In Colossians 4:17 we see the very last person Paul has a message for: “*Tell Archippus: See to it that you complete the work you*

have received in the Lord.” Archippus had some official commission in ministry and probably it had to do with the church that met in Philemon’s house. Now we can see why Paul addresses him as well: As Philemon’s pastor he would be a key person to influence Philemon in making a decision to please the Lord.

Application: We need to surround ourselves with the right people if we want to live for Christ. If we want to be godly, righteous, and wise, then those are the kinds of people we need to have in our lives. Proverbs 13:20 says, “***Those who walk with the wise grow wise***” and 1 Cor. 15:33 says “***Bad company corrupts good character.***” Paul wanted to surround Philemon with everyone who would help him do the right thing in forgiving Onesimus. Paul knew that a godly wife, a godly pastor and a godly church can be a tremendous help in helping someone make godly choices. So here’s our challenge: Do we listen to the godly people in our life? Do we have godly people in our life? Are the people who are most influential to us the godliest people we know? Are we a godly church that creates an environment for people to grow in godliness?

The Church at Philemon’s House

Lastly, in verse 2 Paul addresses the whole church that was meeting in Philemon’s home, again notice verse 2, “***and to the church that meets in your home.***” So this letter is not just for Philemon, but for the whole church that gathered under his roof. Paul wanted the whole church to be informed about the amazing events in Onesimus’ life after he ran away because they have a role to play when he returns as well.

First of all Paul simply wanted them to understand they were going to have a new member in their congregation. Therefore Paul wanted the whole church to understand how to treat Onesimus.

Secondly, Paul wanted the church to follow Philemon’s example of accepting Onesimus as a brother and forgiving him. Philemon was a respected man and many would follow his lead in matters with Onesimus. This highlights for us a very important application: we need to be Conscious of how our decisions affect other Christians. Philemon’s decision about how he would treat Onesimus was going to set an example for everyone else: his wife, the other Christians, the other slaves, and other slave masters. He was center stage with an opportunity to teach others about God’s grace and forgiveness by his own example. Many would use his example as a reference for how to act in their own life. As Christians we don’t live for ourselves and ourselves only. With wisdom, balance, and love we take into consideration how we will affect others with our choices.

Thirdly, the church would provide some indirect pressure on Philemon to go easy on him. Paul knows human nature: we are more likely to do what's right when we are doing it in front of others. Whether anyone in the church actually said anything to him, the fact that they were watching him would be pressure enough.

But there is a fourth reason the whole church was involved. There is to be unity in the act of forgiveness. When the offended person forgives the offender, the rest of the church should forgive too. If Philemon forgives Onesimus the NT teaches that the rest of the church is to forgive. Listen to some passages that present this principle. Back in 2 Corinthians 2:10 Paul said "***If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him.***" Paul's decision to forgive an offender was based on whether or not the church had forgiven him. In other words, Paul honored the church's authority by standing with them: if they had forgiven then he also forgave. If they did not forgive then he did not forgive.

This is incredible. But what is more incredible is that Paul was mirroring what Jesus said. In Matthew 18 we see the instructions Jesus gives the steps for carrying out church discipline with an unrepentant member. At the very end the Lord says to involve the whole church by informing them of the member's sin and then having them pursue that member to persuade him to repent. In verse 17 Jesus said, "***If he does not listen to the church then treat him like you would a pagan or tax collector***". Translation: "*Consider him unclean and separate yourselves from him and have absolutely nothing to do with him.*"

Now, if you think that is intense, listen to the very next words in verse 18, "***Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.***" Those words are directly related to what Jesus just said in the previous verse about church discipline. This means that when the Church follows God's word in church discipline, and officially cuts a member off from all fellowship, the church has made a binding decision. Here's where it gets intense: Jesus says that what is bound on earth by the Church will be bound in heaven. Apparently God will honor the decision of the Church when the Church follows His word and if the Church cuts off fellowship on earth than heaven cuts off fellowship as well. But the opposite is true too, if the Church forgives someone and receives them back into fellowship then heaven honors that decision as well. Jesus made very similar statements in John 20:23, "***If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.***"

What does all this mean? It means that there is unity in forgiveness. Just like heaven will honor the Church's decision to forgive, and just like Paul will honor the Corinthian church's decision to forgive, the church was supposed to honor Philemon's decision to forgive Onesimus.

Would Philemon forgive him? Colossians 3:13 says, "***Forgive as the Lord forgave you.***" Could Philemon forgive Onesimus just like God had forgiven him? One of the dangers of the Christian life is to withhold from others what God has freely given us. Sometimes in the face of forgiveness we forget that we have been forgiven much. When we lose sight of our own debt we lose the ability to cancel the debt of others. We start to see all the faults of others and forget all about our own.

Illustration: One of the joys we are finding in using the Family Worship plans in our home is to listen to our children learn great songs. To hear their little voices singing lifts you right up. But there is nothing better for your ears when they spontaneously start singing throughout the day. The song that Reese requests a lot is Amazing Grace. And as little ones start to learn the songs its humorous to hear them get certain words wrong. For instance, when she first learned the song she would say, "*Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.*" She's got it right these days but the other day while playing on the floor she sang what I think is the Pharisee version, "*Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like you.*" I think someone's wife looked up from her book and said, "*I think she's singing to you*".

Remember our applications today: 1) Wives, be a godly influence in your husband's decisions, 2) Surround yourself with godly people to help you make godly decisions, and 3) we need to be willing to forgive.

Philemon 4-7

Today we are moving along with Paul into a new thought. He is still in his introduction, but, in verse 4 through 7 he moves from identifying himself and those whom he wanted to read the letter, and now he moves on to praise Philemon. This was the common way of writing letters in that day, and, you can see this format in nearly all of Paul's letters. The praise was not simply a formality however, and, Paul wasn't being fake about his commendation of the man. He meant it. It's not like Paul to flatter people to get what he wants. He is always honest, and he is as quick to commend someone as he is to constructively criticize.

I was struck by this this past week. We shouldn't be fake in our praise of people. In my prayer journal for the church I have begun to write down next to your names the things that I think are commendable about you. So rather than just requests and issues going on in your lives I am also taking time now to praise God for the things about you that encourage me.

By doing this I am more conscientious of how each of you refreshes me as a Christian and a pastor. And that is the theme of the sermon today: "A Refreshing Christian". Paul says in verse 7 to Philemon, "***Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.***"

Refreshed comes from a Greek military term meaning to come to a rest after a long march. It was to take a break from the work you were doing in order to find some R&R. It's the water cups at various intervals in a marathon. It's the feeling of being ready to go back to work after a good vacation. To be refreshed refers not so much to the break taken as it does to the effect it has on you. It's the kind of refreshment that brings rejuvenation, motivation and readiness to get back to the task. Today we're going to look at what made Philemon so refreshing, and we will find 3 points for ourselves that help make us a refreshing Christian.

#1: A Refreshing Christian creates an Atmosphere of Appreciation (v4, 7)

First of all, a Refreshing Christian creates an Atmosphere of Appreciation. Notice how Paul talks about Philemon in verse 4, "***I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers***". Then notice verse 7, "***Your love has given me great joy and encouragement...***" If Philemon was in a church, then there would be an atmosphere of appreciation. Philemon made other Christians feel things like joy and encouragement and a sense of being loved and cared for. They knew what it was to be refreshed by him and to be able to get back up with a renewed

motivation to live for Christ. Each of them could share a personal story of how Philemon was there for them. How did that make Paul and these Christians feel about Philemon? They were thankful for him, and, I'm sure their prayers were filled with "thank-you's" to God for giving them a man like Philemon.

There is another side to this point. On one hand we should strive to refresh others in a way that makes them thankful to God. But, on the other hand we should appreciate those who refresh us. But don't miss this point: Paul is grateful for a man who is not directly benefiting Paul, but, the fact that Philemon is actively serving other Christians with love is a huge encouragement to Paul. It's much like when as parents we hear our children in the other room sharing with one another without any interference from us. It makes us grateful when we witness the kindness of someone towards someone else. We aren't only grateful to the Lord for what others do for us.

Application: Does the love and service of other Christians give me joy and encouragement? I have encouraged you to start a blessing list in the past to help you be more thankful for what God is doing in your life. I want to encourage you to expand that list by adding another category: how other Christians are blessing other Christians. The first list focuses on how you are blessed. The 2nd list focuses on how other Christians bless others besides you. This will train us to be grateful not necessarily for what people do for us, but, to be grateful that Christians are actively blessing each other. It creates an atmosphere of appreciation.

#2: A Refreshing Christian is Acknowledged for their Faith in Jesus Christ (v5a)

Secondly, a Refreshing Christian is Acknowledged for their Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice what Paul says in verse 5, "***because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus...***" Verse 5 is the cause of verse 4. In other words, Paul thanks God for Philemon all the time (verse 4) because he has heard about Philemon's faith in Jesus Christ (v5).

This man had a reputation. He was known as someone who had faith in Jesus Christ. And his faith strengthened the faith of others, like what Romans 1:12 says, "***that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.***" This was a man who I believe may have been a candidate for being inducted into the faith Hall of Fame. If ever a NT Faith Hall of Fame is created, Philemon will be there.

It is not unimportant that faith is the first thing Paul lists about Philemon. Faith is what counts. Hebrews 1:6 says, “***Without faith it is impossible to please God, because whoever comes to Him must believe He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.***” Jesus said in Luke 18:8, “***When the Son of Man comes will He find faith on earth?***” And it is only faith that can save someone’s soul. Romans 1:16-17 says, “...”, and then 3:22, “...” and then 6:23, “...” and then Romans 10:9-10, “...” The testimony of the whole NT is that a person can only be saved by faith in Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “...”

Application: Are we known by others for our faith in Jesus Christ? Are we known by our Christian brothers and sisters for our faith? Are we known by the unbelievers around us as someone who believes in Jesus Christ? Does God know us as someone with great faith? Without faith it is impossible to please God. Let us be known for our faith. Let us cause each other to praise God for the faith we have in our Lord

#3: A Refreshing Christian is Affectionate towards all Believers (v5b)

Thirdly, a Refreshing Christian is Affectionate towards all Believers. Notice verse 5, “***because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.***” These two are mentioned often together. Colossians 1:4 says, “***because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints***”. Ephesians 1:15, “***ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints***”.

The reason they are mentioned together is because there is a relationship between faith in Jesus Christ and loving Christians. Faith translates into love. Galatians 5:6 says, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Faith in Christ is expressed by love for Christians. We can say it inversely too: Love for Christians is the expression of our faith in Christ. So, in Paul’s mind, faith inside is made visible through love outside.

Philemon had a deep affection for Christians. Paul is commending him, which means it was more than just sentimental love. His feelings were involved no doubt, but it was that self-sacrificing, servant-heart, humble spirit kind of love that made him want to make sure others were doing well. It’s that gut-love that Paul says he had in Philippians 1:7-8, “***It is right for me to feel this way about all of you since I have you in my heart...God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus***”. The word “affection” there in the Greek means bowels, guts, stomach, which in the Greek mind was the place where the deepest and most powerful affections came from. That’s the kind of “love” Philemon had “for all the saints”.

That's also the kind of love we should have for all of each other. First Peter 1:22 says, "***Love one another deeply from the heart.***" One another means Christian to Christians (C2C). It seems today that we hear a lot about loving the world and loving non-Christians but not a lot about loving each other. It is completely reversed what the NT says. Yes, love all of mankind, but, I challenge you to read the NT and see for yourself if every command to love is not given to Christians to love Christians. While the Church majors on loving the world today, the NT is just the opposite: majoring on loving Christians. The reason is because our love for each other should make anyone who sees it want to be a part of it. John 13:34-35, "***A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.***"

Enlarging our love for each other.

#4: A Refreshing Christian Actively shares their Faith (v6)

Fourthly, a Refreshing Christian Actively Shares their Faith. Notice verse 6, "***I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.***" The wording of the NIV has always made me think of this as a classic evangelism verse: "sharing your faith". But, as I studied this last week I learned that this is not primarily an evangelism verse. This verse refers first and foremost to the fellowship among Christians.

The idea here is that we share our life together as Christians because of our mutual faith in Christ. We have all been brought together into a relationship with Christ and with one another. God intends for us to have relationships with each other and in the context of those relationships we share with each other all the blessings we have received from God.

Illustration: Let's use an illustration. Every year the Jensen's grow a huge garden out at their house. And every year they share out of the abundance that grows up in their garden. Many of us have received large helpings of potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, and more that grew in their garden. They share it because they have so much but more so because they enjoy sharing it with others.

Each of us are like gardens where the Lord has planted seeds for all sorts of fruits and vegetables to grow. He wants to see these seeds grow into the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of righteousness in our lives, and He wants to see us sharing with each other the things that have been put in our garden. We're not talking about material wealth. We are talking about the spiritual wealth that is

ours in Christ. Colossians 2:1-3 would relate directly to this point. Turn there with me and lets read, “....”

We are rich in the faith and out of those riches we are to share with each other for the benefit of one another. Sharing our faith is not evangelism towards unbelievers, it's the relationships with each other where we share all that we have received from Christ: joy, kindness, love, wisdom, encouragement, comfort, peace, grace, mercy and on and on. We show what we've been given by giving it to others.

What have we received from the Lord? Do we share it with each other? All of us belong to Christ. All of us belong to each other. All of us have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. All of us have each received a gift from the Holy Spirit to minister to one another and build each other up in the faith. This “sharing our faith means we all share in the blessings that come to those who have faith. Let us be Refreshing Christians who actively share all that is ours in the faith.

Conclusion:

We must see this section in the larger context of the letter. In this letter Philemon was being asked to forgive Onesimus and accept him fully as a new brother in Christ. In these few verses Philemon was commended as a man who refreshed others. Paul wanted him to refresh Onesimus by offering him a complete pardon from his transgressions.

God was teaching Philemon new depths of knowing Christ's forgiveness by offering it to someone else. Philemon would be more like Christ the more he forgave.

But there was another side: God intended to use Philemon to teach Onesimus the depths of God's grace. The goal was that at the end of it all, Onesimus would be able to say about Philemon, “I always thank my God for you in all my prayers, because your love, my brother has refreshed my heart.”

And Lesson: Showing mercy and forgiveness refreshes others. Withholding mercy and forgiveness burdens others.

Philemon 8-11

Review: Philemon was a Christian man from the city of Colossae, who was saved because of the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Philemon was also a wealthy man because his house was big enough for a church congregation to meet in and he owned at least one slave. It is this slave that our story turns. His name was Onesimus and one day he stole some money from Philemon and ran away. Once he escaped he made it all the way to Rome. While in Rome trying to “get lost” in the busyness of Rome’s capital, he ran into none other than the Apostle Paul, who was himself under arrest and awaiting trial. Paul the great evangelist led Onesimus to faith in Christ and the slave became free in the truest sense – “free from his sins”. Jesus said, “***the truth will set you free. If the Son sets you free you are free indeed.***”

Somehow it came to light afterwards that Paul had in front of him a runaway slave belonging to a man he knew personally. The right thing for Onesimus to do was go back to his master, Philemon. After staying with Paul and helping Paul minister for a time, Paul sent Onesimus back, but not empty handed. Paul wrote a personal letter to Philemon appealing to him as a friend. He asked him to forgive Onesimus all wrong, and accept him back not as a slave, but, as a fellow brother in Christ. So you can imagine the look on Philemon’s face as his prodigal slave stood before him, truly sorry, and as he read these words of the Apostle Paul. Read verse 1-11

Paul starts with identifying himself, then names the people he wanted to read the letter, and then takes time to specifically praise Philemon. Now he is beginning his appeal in verse 8.

#1: The Apostle’s Authority (v8)

Notice first the Apostle’s Authority in verse 8, “***Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do***”. Paul does not mention the fact that he is an Apostle, but he is clearly referring to it in this verse. People who have authority give orders and Paul could have come at Philemon with a command because of his Apostolic authority.

The highest human authority in the Church is the Apostle (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11). They were called and commissioned by God to be witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:22-23; 1 Cor. 12:28). They were empowered to do miracles, healings, exorcisms and other wonders (2 Cor. 12:12). They were given authority in the Church so that their teachings and instructions were binding upon the body of believers (2 Cor. 13:10). They were the human vessels

God used to establish the Church upon the earth (Ephesians 2:20). After their purpose was fulfilled the age and office of Apostles discontinued.

As an Apostle, when the occasion called for it he could be very bold. Notice he says that he “**could be bold**”. If you are familiar with Paul then you know that this is a very true statement. When needed Paul could be severely bold. Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 12:19-13:2, 10. Another example is in Galatians 2:11-14.

Application: Do we recognize apostolic authority? Apostles were God’s highest human authorities in the early Church. Paul’s appeal was the appeal of an Apostle, and, Philemon would be wise to carefully consider his beloved Apostle’s request. But the authority of the Apostle’s continues to this day. Not because Apostle’s still exist, but, because what they wrote is in the Bible. Do we recognize Apostolic authority? When we submit to the teachings of Scripture in the NT that is how we recognize that these men were God’s Apostles.

#2: The Apostle’s Affection (v9)

Secondly we see the Apostle’s Affection in verse 9, “***yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus***”. Paul was not one-dimensional. As bold as Paul could be, it was not with boldness that he spoke to Philemon. While he could be a lion Paul could also be a lamb. He was sophisticated in his ability to persuade people. In other words, he had more than a hammer in his tool box.

So what we are seeing here is that Paul did not want to approach Philemon on the basis of his authority, but, rather, on love. So he sets his apostolic authority aside and comes to him with love. He wants Philemon to feel the full weight of the love he had in his own heart towards Paul - which would have been helped by thinking of Paul as an old man in prison.

Paul is doing something here I think is great. He is appealing to the high virtue of the Christian faith: love. If you look closely he is urging Philemon to do something that you can only do from love: and that is forgive. Love translates into forgiveness. Maturing Christ-like love will be more capable of forgiveness.

But Paul doesn’t treat Philemon as though he were lacking in love. Just the opposite – Paul knows that Philemon does “love” very well, which is why in verse 5 and 7 Paul praises him for his love. Remember Philemon’s name actually means, “Beloved”, or, “Affection”. So Paul is doing 2 things here I think we need to see when he appeals to Philemon on the basis of love.

First, he wants Philemon to draw out of that deep well of love that he already has in order to forgive Onesimus. He wants Philemon to think of his own good character, his own good reputation, his own awareness of his own personal ethic in Christ and act according to it. (Even to live up to it!)

But secondly, Paul wants him to grow even further in an area that he already is very good: love. Paul is putting the issue of forgiveness before the man and it will challenge him to expand his love even further. His love was going to have to be enlarged in order to forgive Onesimus. In doing so, his capacity for love will have increased, and so he will be brought that much closer to the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ and his love.

Application: Make your strengths stronger. Keep growing in areas of your spiritual life you do well in already. Growth is not just for the weak spots in our lives. First Thessalonians 4:1 says, “***Finally brothers we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.***” Verse 10 says, “***And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.***” See how he affirms them that they are good at loving, yet, he urges them to become even better? We will be challenged in aspects of our spiritual life to go from being *okay* to *good* to *very good* to *excellent* in areas of our Christian life. So be careful when you begin to think “I do that pretty good”, because complacency will be challenged head on.

Application: How do we approach people when we are trying to persuade them? Do we recognize when a soft touch is needed? Or do we always use a hammer? Proverbs 25:15 says, “... ***a gentle tongue can break a bone.***” That means that the power of persuasion is not always in aggressiveness, but, more often is found in gentleness. Let us be sensitive to when gentleness is the best approach. Let us be sensitive to when an appeal to love rather than authority is the best basis for persuading someone.

#3: The Apostle’s Adoption (v10)

Thirdly, we see the Apostle’s Adoption, notice verse 10, “***I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.***” NT writers often referred to their congregations and converts as their children.

Philemon has seen Paul as a prisoner, an old man, and now as a loving father. A father who loves his son dearly - a son with whom Philemon had a grievance. The angle here is that if you love the father you show that by loving

his son. We see that in our relationships – if you love your friend then there is a natural transference of love to his child that you develop. You make me feel loved when you show my children your affection. So it is too with God. The Bible says to love God you must love His Son. It was a powerful way to appeal to Philemon and another key to hopefully unlock all that love in his heart and let it come out. Would Philemon’s great love for Paul now be reflected in loving his son?

But Paul is not just expanding the way Philemon sees Paul. He is also expanding Philemon’s view of Onesimus. He is helping his beloved friend see Onesimus as more than just a runaway slave and thief. This is so key to forgiveness. When we have a grudge we get tunnel vision – that is we can only see the other person for their offense against us. In other words we lose sight of all the other ways to see them and we only see them in light of what they did to us. Paul is moving Philemon around to see Onesimus from different angles in this letter: Paul’s son (10), a servant of Jesus Christ (11), a brother in Christ (16), a great help in the work of the Gospel (11), a repentant man wanting to make things right (v12). He didn’t want Philemon to only think about Onesimus as a criminal.

There is an application here for us: If we are ever to forgive we must not succumb to this “tunnel vision”. We must not allow ourselves to see them only in light of their sin against us. The only thing this will do is fuel bitterness within us and perpetuates an unforgiving spirit. We must pray earnestly and seek the Lord’s help to see them as the Lord wants us to see them. This will help us open our hearts to the offender and forgive them.

This kind of forgiveness is not forced. Nor is it done as a favor. Paul is not asking a favor of Philemon, “Hey, I know you’re mad, but, could you do this for me buddy?” Paul wants Philemon to own the decision. He wants it to be all “Philemon” without any of “Paul” in the choice (v14). Forgiveness is one of the greatest acts of free will.

There is a speculative point I want to suggest – a point that brings an application for us. There is the possibility that Onesimus was God’s gift to Paul while in prison. I doubt anyone had the resolve of the Apostle Paul. But I don’t want to think of him as being more than human. What I mean is that it is possible while he was in prison he could have had a passing thought, “*Is everything I’m doing worth it? Is the sacrifice and the work and the hardship making any difference? Here I am in chains. Man I’m a long way from the Damascus road.*” If that it is something Paul thought, then imagine the encouragement he would have had when God led Onesimus to Paul so Paul could lead him to Christ. He could have

been a gift from God to Paul to remind Paul that “Yes! Everything you are doing does matter, it is making a difference, and it while it is spreading far beyond you it is also coming back to you in Onesimus.” Application: Never wonder if what you are doing for the Lord’s honor is effective. Everything done for the honor of Jesus Christ and the spread of the Gospel will be effective. God makes things grow. Furthermore, the Lord is sensitive to those times when we need to be picked up. Wow! What a pick me up when Onesimus accepted Christ! God knows what we need.

Underlying all of this is the basic point that Philemon should adopt Onesimus just as Paul did. Accept him with the affection of a father towards a child. If he did, unity and peace would prevail. Paul was working to build unity in the church. Paul wasn’t afraid of beatings, floggings, hunger, sneering or anything – except one thing. He could handle all of those things, but the one thing he couldn’t bear was division in the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3). You see here a man who almost – not quite – but on the verge of pleading with Philemon. Coming from anyone it is persuasive. Coming from a man who was an Apostle it was powerfully humbling.

#4: The Apostle’s Assistant (v11)

Lastly we see the Apostle’s Assistant in verse 11, “***Formerly he was useless to you but now he has become both useful to you and to me.***” The name Onesimus literally means, “useful”. Paul is playing on words here. When Onesimus ran away Philemon had “no use” for him - he whose name was “Useful” became “useless”. It reminds us of our Lord’s words, “***If the salt loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything...***” In other words, “***what use is it?***” But now that Onesimus was a believer, he was useful again, and even more so than he was before. He was useful to Paul, now Paul wanted Philemon to find him useful again. Now he was useful both in Philemon’s house, and the house of God. Now he was useful as a servant of Philemon, and a servant in the work of the Lord.

Application: When we get saved we become useful. The Holy Spirit indwells us and gives each of us a spiritual gift to use for helping others grow in Christ. Each of us actually become necessary to the whole body of Christ. We can call this “Intentional Interdependence”. God designed each of us to need each other. No one is useless. No one is dispensable. No one can say “I am not useful” and no one can say, “that guy isn’t useful.”

Sidebar note: This is why an unrepentant Christian is such a serious thing: so long as they persist in worldliness and sin they forfeit their usefulness to

Christ. This is because our usefulness is predicated on our faithful pursuit of righteousness in our life. Second Timothy 2:21 says, “***If a man cleanses himself from [sin], he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.***” An unrepentant sinning Christian is like a lame foot on the Body of Christ, unable to be used. This is why restoring a sinning Christian is so important too: to restore them back to a place of usefulness in building up the Body of Christ.

Our usefulness has nothing to do with how talented or skilled we are, or aren't. First Corinthians 1:26 says, “***Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many of you were influential, not many were of noble birth.***” Our usefulness has everything to do with the Holy Spirit – whom we've all been given. If we have Him we are necessary to others and their growth and they are necessary for our growth. The point is that it all starts with a recognition that you can't do anything in and of yourself. It's what God does in you and through you. “***With man this is impossible, but, with God all things are possible.***” “***Apart from Me you can do nothing.***” “***I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.***” Robert Mc'Cheyane, “A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.

Philemon 12-14

Alexander the Great early on during his rise to greatness entered the great Greek city of Athens. While on his way somewhere important with his host of soldiers he came upon a man lying across a wooden barrel basking in the sun and working on his tan. His name was Diogenes, and he was the famous philosopher who lived in the barrel he was at that moment lying upon. Alexander stopped and standing before Diogenes asked him, “*What can I do for you?*” The philosopher opened his eyes and looked at the soon to be conqueror of the world and said, “*Move. You are blocking my sunlight.*” Upon hearing this, Alexander looked at his soldiers and said, “*If I were not Alexander, I would want to be Diogenes!*”

Sometimes, in the Christian life, there are great obstacles preventing God’s light from shining into our lives. Un-forgiveness is one of those obstacles. It can eclipse the light of Jesus Christ in us and cause us to wither away in bitterness rather than grow. The letter to Philemon addresses the issue of forgiveness and we are leaving no stone unturned in this beautiful letter’s words. It is like a diamond and we are making sure to see it from every angle. The reason is simple: the more we can learn about forgiveness the better we will be. This small letter has big lessons for us in living for Jesus Christ.

Paul is in prison and writes this letter. A young runaway slave named Onesimus has crossed paths with the Apostle and has been led to faith in Jesus Christ. Now, Paul in sending the slave back to his owner, whom Paul knew personally, he is sending him back with a letter for his master. Paul’s letter is a masterpiece in the art of advocating for someone.

Forgiveness leads to Faithfulness (v12-13)

Forgiveness leads to faithfulness. Notice verse 11-12 with me, “...” We have to see the situation these words are written from: Onesimus, who was a slave to Philemon, ran away from his master, and after coming to faith in Jesus Christ, he was now returning to his master he ran away from. We can learn 3 very important lessons here

First, when we experience forgiveness for our sins, we do not treat it as a license to go on sinning. Romans 6:1 says, “***What shall we say then, shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!***” Salvation is deliverance not only from the penalty of sin but also from the pattern of sin. Second Timothy 1:9 says, “***[God] has saved us and called us to a holy life...***” First Peter 1:15-16 says, “***But just as He who called you is holy so be holy in all you do. For it is written, ‘Be holy because I am holy.’***” Ephesians 4:1 says, “live worthy of your calling

The right thing for Onesimus to do was go back and continue as Philemon's slave and serve him. Paul didn't encourage Onesimus to stay, he didn't make excuses for him to stay and he didn't harbor him. They did the right thing and decided Onesimus should go back to his master and go back to being a slave. It would have been wrong to do otherwise. And when we come to Christ we start doing what's right – forgiveness leads to faithfulness, and is not a license to go on sinning.

We often hear people who say things like, “*So if God forgives me all my sins does that mean I can just go and commit sin and ask for forgiveness and everything is just ‘hunky-dorey?’*” No. Their premise is wrong: Forgiveness of sins equals license to sin. Jude actually condemns anyone who would teach people to think this way, “***They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.***”

Instead, the Bible says that when we are forgiven our sins it leads to a desire to live apart from sin. Think about this, true conviction of sin does not manifest itself in the guilt-free indulgence of sin, but, rather a disgust with it. When we see sin in us for what it is we are repulsed by it, we do not relish in it. We see how wrong it is and a developing hunger for what is right grows in us. “***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness***” (Matthew 5:6).

Second Corinthians 7:10-11 describes what this looks like in someone's life. Key in on the phrase “godly sorrow”, “***Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.***” The idea here is that when someone has turned to God in humble conviction (godly sorrow) to receive forgiveness for their sins it produces a change in them: a desire to make right the wrongs they have done – wherever possible. This is rooted in what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:23-24, “***If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.***”

A wonderful example of this is the conversion of the wealthy chief tax collector named Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10. Tax collectors were typically Jews hired by the Roman government to collect taxes from the Jews for the Roman government. You cannot understate how much the Jews hated these Jews for

betraying their countrymen for the sake of money. They were in a category of hatred all by themselves. Often they extorted the people for more than the government demanded which is why they could become very wealthy. Zacchaeus was very wealthy from his cheating people. But listen to what Zacchaeus says when he comes to Jesus Christ for salvation, “***But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything I will pay it back four times the amount.’***”

When we come to Jesus Christ and we acknowledge our sin to Him, if we have sinned against others we will seek them out to make it right. We don’t just “let it go” and say, “Oh, they’ll get over it” or “I’m right with God so I don’t need to get right with them.” Application: Does the Lord’s forgiveness of my sins fuel my desire to live righteously?

A second lesson here is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a mission to reform a society or culture. This is going to rub a lot of people the wrong way, but, something is ever so evident in what Paul is doing in this whole situation: he is sending a runaway slave back to his master. Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, called and sent by God and not man, says absolutely nothing about the moral failure of the system of slavery in Rome; he says nothing about whether Christians should be trying to overthrow this oppressive system, and he certainly does not try to help an runaway slave to illegally escape a system in the name of Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 7:20-24 Paul is very specific that if you are saved when you are a slave then remain a slave. He says try to get your freedom, if you can do it legally, but, “***Each one should remain in the situation he was in when God called him.***”

Nowhere do we ever see any hint that Paul or the early church set out to rid society of slavery. There were no marches, picketing, sit-ins, boycotting, or demonstrations mentioned anywhere. Contrary to Liberation Theology and Social Gospelism, the Church’s agenda is not to re-order society according to Christian ideals. Instead you see the Bible provides the moral and ethical guidelines for Christians to operate within the existing immoral society. Paul sent Onesimus back to his position as a slave. It was not a Christian slave-owners obligation to free his slaves but it was his obligation as a Christian to treat them kindly and fairly. Furthermore, it was not a Christian slave’s right to desert his position, but it was his responsibility before God to serve his master with faithful integrity. That is why you will find every instruction to slaves in the NT is to serve well and never to escape or runaway illegally. (Example Colossians 3:22-25)

Application: We are called to live a godly life in ungodly situations, and, even if it comes at a cost to ourselves. But, we must remember that God will reward us for our sacrificial faithfulness to obey Him. Are you like Onesimus, trying to runaway from something? Are you thinking like he was, “If I can only get out of this situation” and, “There’s got to be more than this. This isn’t where I want to be in life.” Like Onesimus, and like Jonah too, perhaps you don’t want to face what’s in front of you and getting out is all you can think about. We are called to live a godly life in ungodly situations, and, even if it comes at a cost to ourselves. But, we must remember that God will reward us for our sacrificial faithfulness to obey Him.

Application: We need to be careful to stay on track with the Great Commission Jesus Christ gave us: Proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and building up believers in the faith. That’s it. And that was clearly the focus of Paul in this situation. He cared more about this individual Christian’s growth in Christ which was of eternal importance, more than he did of freeing him from a temporary bad situation.

Francis of Assissi said, “Preach the Gospel and when necessary use words.” Jesus came to preach. The Apostles were sent to preach. Romans 10:14 says emphatically, “***How can they be saved if they haven’t called on the Lord? How can they call on the one they have not believed in? How can they believe in one they’ve not heard? How can they hear without someone preaching to them? How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!***” NOT, “*How beautiful the feet of those who do good deeds.*”

Assissi’s gospel is a sissy gospel, it’s social activism. Despite the good intentions of some, the Gospel is not something we do, it is something we proclaim. It is what Jesus Christ did for us, not what we do for Him. The Gospel is a message about Jesus that is to be told, not a mission to be lived. The Gospel must be heard so that it can be believed so that people can be saved from their sins and the wrath of God. It is not a mission to transform this burning world into a world of righteousness. This world is destined to undergo the wrath of God and it is the first earth that is going to pass away and make way for a new earth in the future.

Have you believed the Gospel for your own salvation?

Thirdly, we need others in our lives to help us do what is right. Paul was discipling Onesimus. Notice Paul’s words, “***I am sending him back to you...***” Paul was Onesimus’s spiritual authority, and guide, and mentor, and as such he

was integrally involved in his decision to return to Philemon. And, as a new Christian and he was teaching Onesimus what it meant to live for Jesus Christ. We need to surround ourselves with godly people to help us live for Christ. I suggest we need the input of godly Christians around us for 2 reasons.

First, to help us find the right way when we don't know. So much of living a Christian life is about making decisions, handling situations and determining how to proceed. We need others who are full of the Holy Spirit, mature, and able to help us understand God's Word to make choices about how we live for Christ.

But, secondly, we need others around us because we need their encouragement to do what's right when we know what is the right thing to do. It doesn't say, but, I think Paul probably led Onesimus to go back. I'm sure it was a conversation that Onesimus was hoping wouldn't happen, but, when it did, he knew it was right and Paul no doubt gave him the encouragement he needed. You have to remember that a runaway slave that was caught often received horrible punishment. They would be branded with a hot iron with the letter "F" which stood for "Fugitivus", meaning "fugitive" in Latin. If their master wanted to execute them they could without the law getting in their way. Many runaway slaves were crucified. This is what Onesimus could be going back to. I don't think Philemon would do any of that because he was a Christian, but, legally he could do any of that and more.

This was a brave decision for Onesimus to go back. He was putting his life at risk in returning to his master. But it is a testimony to his Christian character, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit that he was willing to do what was right even in the face of such great risk to himself.

Application: I was told a long time ago by a wise person, "*The right thing to do is often the hardest thing to do.*" True words. Usually you can tell the right course to take because of your options it is the hardest. Encouragement from your friends in Christ to do the right thing is just as valuable as the wisdom they give to help you discover the right thing to do.

Application: Do the right thing no matter what the risk is.

Philemon v14-17

Forgiveness is Voluntary (v14)

Forgiveness is voluntary. Notice verse 14, "...” I would suggest forgiveness is one of the highest expressions of our free will. Paul wants Philemon to voluntarily forgive Onesimus. He wants it to be all Philemon and none of Paul. Paul does not want Philemon to feel guilted into forgiving Onesimus. He does not want him to feel forced, to only say the words but secretly harbor his grudge. Paul wants Philemon’s forgiveness to come from his heart, not from Paul.

The Lord never simply wants outward obedience from us. He seeks from us a life that is lived voluntarily from the heart, not a life that veils the heart. He wants our outward obedience to express our inner obedience. Sometimes our outward obedience actually masks our inward disobedience. This can be easy to do as Christians because we certainly don’t want to be seen as unforgiving people, after all, being forgiven is the definition of being a Christian. Our Biblical ethic we all know is that we are to be quick to forgive. And while we don’t want to seem like we’re being unchristian by withholding forgiveness, we can say we’ve forgiven while harboring unforgiving attitudes and acting in an unforgiving way.

This problem is that we let God shape us outwardly, but, not inwardly. But God not only looks upon the heart and sees the heart, He works in our hearts. He wants us to love Him with all our heart, soul, strength and mind (Mark 12:30). He wants us to love each other deeply from the heart (1 Peter 1:22). He wants us to set our hearts on things above (Col. 3:1) and to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts (Col. 3:15). He wants us to believe in Him with all our hearts (James 1:5-8) and not harbor doubt. The life lived for Christ is lived fully from the heart.

And a life lived for Christ from the heart will lead to voluntarily forgiving from the heart - like Christ. We don’t do it to put up Christian pretenses. We don’t do it because of peer pressure. We don’t do it begrudgingly. We don’t do it outwardly to give the appearance, we do it outwardly because it is what we have done inwardly in our hearts. That means we volunteer to forgive completely, generously and wholeheartedly. It means we volunteer to relate to the other person no longer on the basis of their sins, but, as though they’ve not sinned. It means we volunteer to cancel the debt they owe us and no longer see them as “owing” us. It means we volunteer to stop bringing up what they did: to them, to others, and to ourselves. That is forgiveness. And as Christians it must be done from the heart.

The key that unlocks the heart for this forgiveness is that we remember the forgiveness we have received from the Lord. Colossians 3:13 is a companion verse to this letter, “***Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.***” He has forgiven us all our sins completely. He doesn’t see us in light of our sins anymore. The Bible uses language like, “All our sins are cast into the sea”, or, “Our sins have been separated from us as far as the east is from the west”, or, “God remembers our sins no more.”

But, what if the Lord related to us based on the way we relate to others? What if He forgave us in the same way we forgive others? Would He forgive us in a way that He would cancel our sin from His records? Or would He keep bringing up all our past failures because that’s what we do after we say we’ve forgiven? Would He relate to me based on my past sins and treat me in light of all my past, even though He had forgiven me?

God’s Providence (v15)

Secondly we see Paul suggesting God’s Providence in this situation. Notice verse 15, “***Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was so that you might have him back for good.***” Paul wants to take the events that have unfolded in this story and place them into the hands of God. Because that is what is evident here: God’s hand. Paul doesn’t want Philemon to see this situation simply as an isolated human event. He infers that God may have been overseeing the course of events. “***Perhaps the reason...***” He’s not talking about the stars aligning; he is talking about a sovereign God who is intimately involved in the lives of people like Onesimus and Philemon, and you and me. Proverbs 16:9 says, “***In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.***” Proverbs 20:24 says, “***A man’s steps are directed by the LORD, how then can anyone understand his own way?***” Let us draw 3 points here:

First, God is not the author of sin, but, God can and does use the sinful situations people create to accomplish His purposes. A classic example of this is the story of Joseph. He was the youngest son of Jacob and the favorite. But Joseph’s 11 brothers were jealous of him and so they sold him into slavery and lied to their father telling him that he was eaten by wild animals. Joseph eventually was brought to Egypt and by God’s favor he became the 2nd most powerful man in Egypt, behind only Pharaoh.

Eventually a famine caused Joseph's brothers to come to Egypt for help. I'm sure they never thought they'd see their brother again, and I'm even more sure that they never thought Joseph would be the 2nd most powerful man in the nation they were going to for help. It is a gripping narrative in the last chapters of Genesis. But in that meeting Joseph forgives his brothers for what they did to him. And it is his next words we get to see how a great man of God made sense of the senseless injustice committed against him when he utters those epic words tying together the evil of men and the providence of God in Genesis 50:20, "***You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives***".

Joseph saw the evil perpetrated against him in the greater context of God's plans to help save lives. He never saw that years ago as he rode away in the wagon of the slave traders who just bought him from his brothers. As he watched his brothers fade away behind him I'm sure he asked God why this was happening and how he could let this horrible thing happen to him. But it was later on that he would learn to understand that the tragedy in his life was in God's hands and would be used in His greater plans for good.

It's a reminder for us that no matter how bad a situation becomes God is greater than what we are going through and He is able to make something good, beautiful, wonderful and great out of it. It's also a reminder that God's plans for the world are not limited to our own personal world. What's going on with us is part of bigger plans God has going on. We are not the sum total of what God is doing.

Secondly, perhaps God allows people to commit a serious sin in order for them to develop a sense of guilt, and a recognition of their need for forgiveness. Hang with me here a minute. Many people don't believe they've done anything very serious where they deserve God's condemnation. The Bible is clear that all are condemned as sinners whether all sense their guilt before God or not. But, perhaps God out of grace lets someone commit a sin so that finally they see that they are sinners and finally sense guilt and that they too need God's gracious gift of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Onesimus may have been like this. Perhaps he was so resentful of being a slave, blaming his master and even God for his lot in life, that he may have been completely deaf to any notion that he needed forgiveness. Perhaps he was so obsessed with escaping slavery that he didn't care about this Jesus his master kept talking about. What I'm suggesting is that he needed to become a fugitive from men in order to recognize he was already a fugitive from God.

Application: Are you deaf to the Gospel because you are so tuned in to something in this world? Are you someone who thinks you have done nothing to deserve God's condemnation?

Thirdly, we must never underestimate God. We must expect the unexpected when you're dealing with God. You cannot anticipate Him. Philemon never in a million years would have guessed things would have turned out the way they did. His slave runs away and hundreds of miles away he "accidentally" runs into the Apostle Paul, the same man who led Philemon to Christ. And in meeting Paul Onesimus trusts Christ as his Savior and returns to Philemon to make things right. No way Philemon expected any of that. But, when you are dealing with God, never underestimate Him. You can't anticipate what He is going to do, but, you have to anticipate Him. In other words, expect the unexpected.

I love how Abraham did that. His expectation that God could do the unexpected reflected his faith. In Hebrews 11:17-19 it explains Abraham's reasoning behind his willingness to obey God and offer Isaac as a sacrifice to God. It says "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead..." In other words, it made no sense to kill Isaac since God promised that through Isaac Abraham would have many children. So Abraham reasoned to himself that in order to fulfill that promise God would have to raise Isaac from the dead, was able to do it, and would do it to fulfill his promise to Abraham. So Abraham did not underestimate God, but expected the unexpected. When our God is all-knowing and all-powerful, and we are not, we should look for Him to do things we never would have thought.

How has God done things in your life you never thought He would have done? What are you asking Him to do that you really can't see how He's going to do it? What Red Sea are you not expecting?

Forgiveness Results in a New Relationship (v16-17)

Notice in verse 16 and 17 how Forgiveness leads to a new Relationship, "...". When someone becomes a new creation in Christ, it results in a new relationship. God now has a new relationship with them. He relates to them on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and no longer on the basis of their sin. He now has peace towards them, no longer wrath. He is now their heavenly Father, no longer their enemy.

This teaches us that when we forgive someone, like God, we begin to relate differently to that person. Our disposition and attitude towards them is changed.

In light of Paul's words to Philemon, let me offer several points about this change.

First, when we forgive someone it results in unity with them. Notice how Paul repeats the endearing words "dear" and "brother" when referring to Onesimus in verses 16-17, "...". Remember that Paul referred to Philemon earlier as a "**dear friend**" (v2) and as a "**brother**" (v7). Now the same words used to describe Philemon he was using to describe Onesimus. I believe Philemon would have picked up on this. Paul wanted Philemon to see Onesimus as being on the inside now, he was one of them. He was accepted by the Lord, by Paul, and now the hope was that he would be accepted by Philemon as a dear brother.

One the most outstanding proofs of the supernatural power of the Gospel is that it unites people who otherwise should have nothing to do with each other. There are many reasons people divide with each other, but, Jesus Christ unites those who otherwise would be divided. Galatians 3:28 says, "***There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.***" Colossians 3:11 says, "***Here there is no Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian or Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.***" And 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "***For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.***" Ephesians 2:14 says, "***For Jesus Christ Himself is our peace, He has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.***"

The idea in the NT is that when people have Jesus Christ in common nothing else should divide them. Distinctions like race, gender and social status are not denied. The point of these passages is that unity across these differences is achieved by a commonality that transcends these human differences. There is no greater common bond between two people than Jesus Christ. He transcends race, age, social standing, education, gender, and even as in the case of Philemon and Onesimus, He transcends grievances between two people. He is the reason we don't let these things divide us.

Forgiveness results in a new attitude towards an offender, a new relationship, and a new way of seeing them. Let me illustrate:

Illustration: The other day I was driving along at the speed limit when someone cut me off. My initial reaction was something like, "*Who does this guy think he is? Man, if I still had the super-Kia I would show him a thing or two!*" But then I noticed something in his back window that changed my whole attitude - it

was an Old English “D”. All of a sudden his sinful driving wasn’t as important and my harsh feelings changed. He was a Tigers fan. I am a Tigers fan. He and I, together, love the Detroit Tigers. All of a sudden I was not relating to this guy based on what he did to offend me, but, I was relating to him based on something he had in common with me: Detroit baseball. And because of what we had in common, I was willing to overlook his vehicular offense.

Onesimus wasn’t to be seen as a “thief” and a “fugitive” and a “criminal” anymore. Instead, he was to be regarded as a “dear brother”. Philemon was no longer to relate to Onesimus based on what he did to offend him, but, now he was to relate to Onesimus based on what they both had in common. If Philemon began to look at that, then he would begin to overlook what he saw in Onesimus as more than a slave, and now an equal in Christ, a brother who shared the same grace as he in Christ. He was to treat him as one who was an heir along with him in Christ, as someone who called on the same Father in heaven, and as another laborer in the work of the Gospel. The same forgiveness and favor with which the Lord gave Onesimus was now the forgiveness and favor Philemon was to extend.

But don’t forget the other side of this coin too: Onesimus was to see Philemon differently. That is the other side of this relationship that is important for us to see as well. Before Onesimus viewed Philemon as a master to get away from. Now as a fellow Christian he would serve his master even more faithfully. Turn with me to 1 Timothy 6:1-2. These are some words that Paul no doubt had repeated to Onesimus when he taught him what his responsibility as a slave was to his Christian master. [Read]

Onesimus was returning to do the same thing he used to do but with a different heart. That’s the power of Jesus Christ. Some people think they need new things, a new location, a new person in their lives and all sorts of other things. What they need is a new life in Christ a new life that only Christ can give. The things around us don’t need to change, the thing inside of us does – our heart.

These are insights for how to handle forgiveness between Christians. What about non-Christians? What if I have a grievance with someone who is not a Christian and therefore we don’t have all that stuff in common? Giving forgiveness is still the thing to do.

First of all, giving forgiveness is not something that the Bible says is only done between Christians.

Secondly, showing someone else grace and forgiveness shows that you know the grace of God and His forgiveness. He has forgiven you and now you are forgiving them.

Thirdly, forgiving a non-Christian is an excellent opportunity to share with them the Gospel. Let them experience the freedom that comes with forgiveness and explain to them their need for forgiveness from God in Jesus Christ.

Secondly, when we forgive someone we should rejoice in their repentance. Repentance is an occasion for rejoicing. Paul doesn't say it directly, but, clearly he has rejoiced over Onesimus repentance and clearly he was urging Philemon to do the same. In Luke 15:9 Jesus says, "***I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.***" When someone repents they are turning from evil to righteousness. They are turning to God rather than away from God. They are stepping from the darkness into the light. They are turning from their way and instead turning to God's way. This rejoicing that happens is a rejoicing in the decision this person has made to turn to what is good and right and just. This is cause for celebration.

Of course, what if they don't repent? Are we still called upon to forgive? Yes. They may never come and admit their wrongdoing, but, we are to cancel that wrong from their record. Can anyone honestly say the Lord tells us not to forgive? We should expunge the crime from their record so that if they ever do come and admit what they did they can see that we have a long time ago forgiven them and have not been holding their sin against them.

By waiting until the person comes in repentance before we forgive we have two problems. First there is the problem of our refusal to grant forgiveness to them. We refuse to forgive them in our hearts. Unforgiveness is never condoned in Scripture.

Secondly, so long as we don't forgive them, there is the problem of our frustration and bitterness that they still have not come to admit their wrong to us. We still charge them for their sin against us and the longer we wait for them to admit it the more our resentment grows towards them. This leads to what Hebrews says is "***a bitter root growing in our hearts***".

This growing resentment can all be avoided by forgiving them. They don't need to "be there" for that. The way to do it is to put blisters on your knees as you pray to God to help you forgive them the way He wants you to. Do not stop

praying until your heart has changed towards that person and you have forgiven them and your disposition towards them has been transformed.

Third, we should remember that no one is beyond God's reach. This ties into last week's point about the sovereignty and providence of God. I'm sure Philemon had no idea that things were going to turn out this way. I'm sure he never imagined his runaway slave returning to him as a new man – a fellow Christian.

No one is beyond reach. No one. Is there someone in your life beyond your reach? They may be beyond your reach, but, they are not beyond God's. First Timothy 1:15-16 says it so well. No one is beyond reach. First Corinthians 6:9-11 says it so well too. That is what some of those people used to be. Praise God no one is beyond reach. All they have to do is reach out to God and they will find Him. God's work in Onesimus' life is a great reminder and encouragement to us that even the unreachable are within reach.

Conclusion:

Forgiveness results in a new relationship. A new relationship with God when He forgives us our sins. But, also when we forgive others it transforms our relationship with them – for the better. And I would add this: forgiving others strengthens our relationship with the Lord.

Philemon v17-18

There was a mother that wanted to show her child what Jesus had done in taking our punishment. An opportunity came up one night as they as they ate dinner. The child was misbehaving, which often times led to the consequence of not getting any dessert. The mother told the child, “someone is not getting any dessert tonight.” The child finished his dinner with much disappointment. Then the mom cleared the table and prepared a single serving of ice cream. The boy watched mourning the fact that mom was going to get dessert and he wasn’t. As she came back in she placed the ice cream down in front of him which brought a huge smile, then a look of confusion. “Mommy, aren’t you having any dessert?” To which his mother explained, “I said that someone was not getting dessert tonight for your bad behavior. I decided that I would suffer the consequences for you.”

Today’s theme is going to be “Imputation”. Our sermon title can be, “*Forgiveness through Imputation*”. Imputation is one of the most important words you can know as a Christian. If we get our minds wrapped around this today we will make huge strides forward in our faith.

What is imputation? Imputation means “to charge to someone’s account”. Imputation means to credit to someone’s account, or to reckon to someone’s account, or, to assign to someone’s account. When you’re out to eat with someone and they tell the waiter, “*Put it on my bill*”, that’s imputation. The restaurant is charging your expenses to the other person’s account.

And there is probably no clearer example of imputation seen than the one Paul gives in Philemon verses 17-18. Let’s read

Let us see two ways imputation is at work here.

Imputing Righteousness (v17)

In verse 17 we see imputing righteousness. “***So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.***” In a relational way, Onesimus was to be credited with Paul’s merit as a brother in Christ. Paul wanted Philemon to welcome Onesimus the same way he would welcome Paul. The same gladness of heart, the same comradery, the same sense of partnership that would be waiting for Paul if he arrived, was to be the reception for Onesimus. Treat Onesimus the same way you would treat Paul. To use language we might use today, Paul wanted Philemon to say, “*Any friend of Paul’s is a friend of mine!*” “*Any partner of Paul’s is a partner of mine!*”

This wasn't because of what Onesimus had earned in his relationship with Philemon. It was because of what Paul had. All the merit that was in Paul's account as a servant of Christ was to be credited to Onesimus' account. In other words, Philemon was to treat Onesimus, and feel towards Onesimus as though he was as accomplished as Paul in the work of the Gospel, even though he wasn't. That's how Paul wanted his personal equity to be used in this situation.

We could not have a better runway into talking about Jesus Christ. This is exactly what happens to us in our relationship with God when we believe in Jesus Christ. We have no merit on our own. There is nothing we can show to God about ourselves that would earn us righteousness before Him. All our righteousness is as filthy rags before Him (Isaiah 64:6).

So if we are unable to produce righteousness all by ourselves in God's sight, where could we ever get it? If our account is empty, and we are broke in terms of righteousness, how could we ever possibly be righteous in God's sight?

One word: imputation. If we don't have any righteousness in our own account then it must be credited to our account from someone else's. It must be imputed. Here is the amazing teaching of the Bible: all the righteousness that Jesus Christ has in His account is credited to ours. All that is His is assigned to our account. Listen to 2 Corinthians 5:21, "***God made Him who had no sin to become sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God.***" First Corinthians 1:30 says that "***Christ has become for us righteousness...***" It is the righteousness of God that is credited to our account through Jesus Christ. Listen to Romans 1:17, "***For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last...***" Romans 3:22, "***This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.***" Turn to Philippians 3:7-9 [Read].

Our account before God is filled with the righteousness of God and it comes through Christ when we put our faith in Him. This means that God sees us as having righteousness. And what Paul said to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus is what Christ says to God on our behalf: "*Welcome them as you would welcome me.*"

Illustration: If we look through a piece of red glass, everything is red; through blue glass, everything is blue; through yellow glass, everything is yellow, and so on. The glorious truth is that when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, God looks at us through the Lord Jesus Christ. He sees us in all the white holiness of His Son. That is the great New Testament doctrine of the

imputation of our sin to the account of Christ and His righteousness to our account.

So this is what Paul was replicating in this situation. He is taking whatever merit he has with Philemon, and he wants it to be credited to Onesimus' account, so that Philemon will forgive and accept Onesimus – so that he will “welcome him as he would welcome Paul.”

Question: “*If I’m righteous before God, how come I struggle to be righteous in the way I act?*” Answer: Imputing is not the same as imparting. Imputed righteousness means we are thought of as being righteous. Imparted righteousness would mean we actually become righteous, or, to say it another way, we would have righteousness infused in us. But this isn’t what happens: we don’t become righteous, instead we are regarded as righteous. We are reckoned as righteous. We are considered righteous. But in our actual condition we are not actually righteous.

This explains why we still commit sin and it explains why the NT commands us to keep growing in righteousness. It is not saying get more righteous so you can be saved. It means that from the moment you are saved you are considered by God to be fully righteous, and you are credited with righteousness in your account (righteousness you did not merit, but, was given to you). But from that point on in your day-to-day living you increasingly conform your ways to be righteous.

Another way to say it is that we are trying to live up to our righteous standing. It’s like being put into a position that is far greater than you can fill. But once in the position you start doing everything you can to live up to that position. Paul said, “Live up to your calling” and “live worthy of your calling”, which means, start being righteous in your life as much as you are righteous in God’s standing.

Application: Forgiving through Imputing. I suggest that one way to help us forgive another brother or sister is to impute righteousness to their account. In other words, credit them with righteousness in your relationship with them. Acknowledge that God has credited their account with righteousness. They didn’t earn it. They’ve been given it. Out of grace. As a gift. And that is how we should regard them too.

Imputing Sin (18)

Then in verse 18, we see the Imputation of Sin. Read verse 18 with me, "..."

Paul wants any wrong that Onesimus has committed to be taken out of his account and credited to Paul's account. It is generally understood by commentators that when Onesimus ran away he apparently stole some money or some property. This is inferred from the words, "If he owes you anything..." This makes sense because if Onesimus, as a runaway slave who had nothing, was going to make it all the way to Rome over 600 miles away, he would need money. So whatever it is that Onesimus took, Paul wants Philemon to no longer hold Onesimus responsible for paying it back, but, instead charge Paul with the debt.

Oh how wonderful a picture of what happens to our account when we trust in Christ. No wonder verse 18 of this letter is referred to so often when it comes to this topic. But here is an important point: Before righteousness can be imputed into our account, our sin must be taken out of our account. This is where the second way imputation is at work in the Bible: the imputation of our sin into someone else's account. We learn that our sin was imputed to Christ's account. Our guilt was assigned to His account. Listen to Isaiah 53:5-6 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13 and 1 Peter 2:24 and 1 Peter 3:18 and 1 John 2:2.

Again, this is imputed sin, not imparted sin. Jesus did not actually become a sinner – He was regarded as a sinner. He was not actually guilty, He was considered guilty when He died on the cross. (MacArthur pg 27, 29)

Illustration: In the OT, under the Mosaic Covenant, the nation of Israel celebrated the Day of Atonement once a year. On that day the High Priest would lay his hands on a goat and confess the sins of the nation. In doing so the sins of the nation were being "credited" to the goat. The sins that Israel had committed were being imputed to the goat. After this the goat would be led to the outside of the camp and released. From there the goat would walk away from the nation into the horizon never to be seen again. "I have separated you from sins as far as the east is from the west." Rather than the people being charged with their sins and driven away from God, their sins were imputed to the goat and the goat was driven away.

Illustration: I remember a speaker one time sharing an illustration from his personal life relating to this topic. He was a father and had 2 kids – a boy and a girl. One time when they were little his son did something that he was very angry about. He didn't want to punish him while he was angry so he sent the kid

to his room while he went out on the porch to sit down and think about the situation – and cool off.

After a while of sitting out there his little daughter came out and sat down next to him on the porch steps. After a few moments of silence she asked, “Daddy, are you upset with Tommy?” He said, “Yes, honey, I am upset with him.” “Do you have to spank my brother?” “Yes, honey, I’m going to have to spank him. What he did was very wrong and he needs to have a spanking.” A few more moments of silence. “Dad?” “Yes, honey?” “Can you spank me instead of Tommy?”

She wanted the charges against her brother to be assigned to her account, and she would pay the debt.

Application: I want to suggest a way of extending forgiveness based on this idea of imputation. Unforgiveness, by its very nature, means that we are continuing to charge the person’s sin to their account. That means that we are still seeking justice for what they’ve done, we are still seeking that they pay what they owe for their wrongdoing. Here is where imputation comes in: their sin was charged to Jesus Christ’s account already and paid for by Jesus Christ at the cross. God punished Jesus for their sin.

And if I can take this wonderful doctrine and apply it in my personal relationships, then I should consider imputation as the basis for my forgiveness. In other words, I should consider forgiving someone because I impute their sins to Christ on the cross. In other words, I remove their charges from their account and charge their sins to the cross of Jesus Christ.

“They must pay!” someone says. But, no, Christ paid it for them. And if that is so, and their penalty has been paid for them, who am I to still charge to their account? I suggest that one way to help us forgive is to put their offense on Christ’s tab.

When you sin as a Christian and seek God’s forgiveness for your sin that is what God does every time: He reckons the sin you committed to His Son’s account, and it is another sin that was paid for at the cross. That’s the basis for God’s forgiveness of us in our relationship with Him, and it is to be ours.

Philemon 19-21

#1: We must Remember our Debt when Forgiving the Debt of Others (v19)

Notice first of all that we must Remember our own debt when forgiving the debt of others. Paul says in verse 19, “***I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self.***” Almost parenthetically Paul reminds Philemon that he was in debt to Paul. It’s the only place in the letter where Paul “twists the arm” a little. Even then, I think it is not to manipulate Philemon, but, to call to attention one very important aspect of forgiveness: remembering our own debt. It raises up the idea of our obligation to forgive as Christians. On the one hand we are commanded to forgive, as we see in Colossians 3:13, “Forgive whatever grievances you have.” But on the other hand we are bound to forgive because we ourselves have been forgiven. Or simply put: we cancel the debt of others because we know our own debt has been forgiven.

The parable of the unforgiving servant illustrates for us the principle that when it comes to forgiving others we ought to remember the debt we’ve been forgiven. If you turn with me to Matthew 18:23-33. You can see here that this servant acted in an awful way, but, what made it particularly awful was that he was unwilling to extend to someone else what was extended to him: forgiveness. When someone owed him a debt he did not stop to consider how his own debt had been cancelled. Such hypocrisy causes us to cringe, yet, we must ask, are we guilty of the same kind of hypocrisy?

Now, of course in this situation with Philemon, it was not Paul who had forgiven Philemon for his sins – it was Jesus Christ. But the message of forgiveness, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the opportunity for Philemon to hear and believe in the Lord, came about because of Paul’s preaching. And because Philemon had eternally benefited from Paul’s ministry there was a certain kind of obligation he had to Paul.

In other words, when Paul says, “***not to mention you owe me your very self***” he is reminding Philemon that it was because of his preaching that he was converted to Christ. So what someone might say. There is a certain debt we have to those who have led us to Christ.

We see this principle throughout Scripture, that those who lead us to Christ are owed a debt. It is appropriate before God to honor those who led us to Christ. For instance, in Romans 15:27 Paul is describing his collection from the Gentile Churches which is to be brought to the Jewish Church in Jerusalem. In

describing the eagerness of the Gentile churches he says in verse 27, “***They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.***” In other words, the Gentile churches were in a sense obligated to share financially with the Jewish church because it was from them that the message of salvation came to them. The blessings in Christ were opened up to the Gentiles because of these Jewish Christians.

This principle – giving back materially to those who bless us spiritually – is seen elsewhere. It is not only those who lead us to Christ, but, also those who lead us in Christ who are owed a debt. In 1 Corinthians 9:11-14 Paul explains the godly principle of financially supporting pastors, missionaries and evangelists for their work. [Read]

How does this relate to Philemon? Well Paul isn’t saying Philemon owed him money. But he owed him nonetheless. Philemon was introduced to the message of Christ and salvation and all the blessings of the Gospel by Paul. And just as the Gentile churches owed the Jewish church for the same thing, and just as the churches owed it to their leaders for the same thing, there was a certain obligation upon Philemon to hear what Paul was saying and do it. Now, again, Paul never not even once uses his authority. He wants the decision to completely be Philemon’s. What he is doing is offering to Philemon still another motivation in forgiveness: remembering your debt. He very well could have told Philemon here to refer to Colossians 3:13, “***Forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.***”

The debt we still owe is the debt to love.

#2: We must see Forgiveness has a Refreshing Effect on the Church (v20)

Next we see the point that Forgiveness has a Refreshing Effect on the Church. Verse 20 says, “***I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.***” It was said in verse 7 that Philemon was a man who refreshed others. Here he was finding himself in a position to refresh even the Apostle Paul. Let me point out 2 very important points.

First, when the church witnesses one Christian forgive another it refreshes the church. We can certainly see how Onesimus would have been refreshed by Philemon’s forgiveness. We can see though here that Paul was looking to be refreshed as he looked upon Philemon’s granting of forgiveness. I want to extrapolate that out even further and say that the whole church meeting in

Philemon's house would have been refreshed to see Philemon extend grace to the young man.

We must never underestimate how conflict between two people inflicts the whole church with distress. For instance, in Philippi, Paul wasn't even there but he was grieved over two women who weren't getting along. Turn there with me and let's read [Read]. In Philippians 4:2-3 he appeals to them to come to agreement and put the issue to rest. So long as they fought with each other everyone around was going to be burdened.

But, if they were to reconcile it would bring a great relief to everyone, and the whole church would be refreshed. So just as bickering, fighting, grumbling and so forth weigh the church down, so on the other hand, when we see grace and forgiveness prevail it refreshes us as Christians.

Second, we must see ourselves in need of what others have. Paul comes across here in a way that seems to say, "*I need you to do this for my heart.*" It was a tremendous burden on Paul I imagine. This is a direct appeal from his heart here. On the one hand Paul is a man who considers himself a father to the young man he is pleading for, and on the other hand he is appealing to a man whom he considers a dear and beloved friend. He is mediating between two men whom he has a great deal of affection for. He is deeply concerned over the state of the relationship between these two men he loves. And Paul is not ashamed to tell Philemon that his own heart is tied up in this so much that in order for it to be at peace he needs Philemon to do this.

Here is yet another dimension of the interdependency we have with each other as Christians. We are each given spiritual gifts to use for building others up in their faith. That means others need what I have and I need what others have. We need each other. Paul not only taught this but practiced it. He wasn't too proud to ask for prayer (Eph. 6:19), to ask for edification (Rom 1:12), to ask for support (...), to ask for a room (Philemon 22) – he even outright argued for his churches to respect him (2 Cor. 10-13). Paul was not just accepting of blessings from others, but, he desired to be blessed by others. That is so hard for us to get our minds around as Americans today.

Illustration: I remember when Evan was going to be born and someone wanted to give us a crib. They wanted to bless us, but, it was taking them a few more days than expected to get it from someone else who had it so they could give it to us. After awhile I said to the person, "Hey, I don't want you to feel like you have to go through all this to get this for us. We'll just go ahead and get

another one.” On the one hand it was hard for me to accept a free gift, and, on the other hand I didn’t want that person to have to go through all that trouble to give it to us. This person’s response stopped me in my tracks and opened up to me a whole new way of looking at gifts. She said, “*Pastor, it isn’t any trouble for us at all, please don’t go get a different one. If you do you will take away our chance to bless you. You need to let us bless you.*” I am 5’10” or 11” inches tall, depending on which gas station attendant is describing me, but in that moment, I felt 2” tall. Our Lord let Himself be blessed by others. Paul sought to be blessed by others. Why do I act so proud when others want to bless me and try to dissuade them from doing that?

Blessings come in material ways like food, money, random acts of kindness. They come in immaterial ways too: encouraging words, in prayer for one another, sharing the word of God and so on. And as we see here in verse 20, blessings come when we see grace prevail in the Body of Christ, when Christians forgive one another, and let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts, so that peace can prevail in the whole Body. Forgiveness refreshes the whole church.

#3: We must develop a Reputation where others can be Confident in us

(v21)

We must develop a Reputation where others can be confident in us. Notice verse 21, “.....” Don’t miss the confidence Paul had in Philemon. This wasn’t a backhanded way of forcing him into forgiving. This was a genuine confidence Paul had in Philemon. How could he have that kind of confidence? Paul could have that confidence because Philemon had that kind of reputation. Remember verse 4-7 [Read]. Philemon was the kind of Christian that other Christians could look to for modeling what is right in the Lord. He was known for that.

Paul leveraged his own reputation in his ministry. He is often times telling people to look at his own example, his own conduct, his own reputation that his readers knew about and he was calling them to emulate him. In other words he wanted them to develop the same kind of reputation that he had as a Christian and a servant of the Lord.

What is our reputation with others? Can others look to us for the right example? Do we have this reputation with outsiders, as Paul asks in Titus and Peter asks in his letters? Husbands do we have this kind of reputation with our wives? Parents do we have this kind of reputation with our children? Deacons do you have this reputation with the church? And yes, the pastor has to ask himself, and be working to have this kind of reputation with the church. Do we have a reputation with others where they know they can look to us with confidence to do what is right?

Philemon 23-24

Paul wasn't alone. He travelled with men who were of the highest caliber of spiritual manhood. The men who served alongside Paul were men who were 2nd to none in the faith. Out of the 6 mentioned in this letter, two of these men would go on and each write a Gospel, Mark and Luke.

These men were Paul's match. Everything Paul suffered these men suffered with him. Take Aristarchus for example, mentioned in verse 24. This guy wasn't afraid of anything or anyone. He was the guy grabbed by the rioting mob in Ephesus (Acts 19). He was with Paul when they shipwrecked on the island of Malta (Acts 27). He may have been in prison with Paul as much as anyone else, probably because Aristarchus was from Thessalonica. Why does that matter? Because Thessalonian Christians knew how to take a beating for their faith and not back down. It is probably this trait that made any of the Thessalonian Christians good candidates for Paul's team (1 Thess. 2:14-17). If you were going to run with Paul to spread the Gospel you were going to get hurt.

This meant that everything Paul was doing his team was doing with him. If he was on one street corner preaching they were on the other corners. If he was up late praying they were at his side. Take Epaphrus, mentioned in verse 23. He was the reason the Colossian church existed in the first place. Colossians 1:7, "***You learned the Gospel from Epaphrus...***" Paul spoke very highly of his work ethic and his willingness to suffer for Christ. But what Epaphrus is probably most famous for is prayer. Paul says in Colossians 4:12, "***He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you...***" When others were getting off their knees to go to bed Epaphrus stayed and prayed. He probably missed meals and sleep and delayed the team's departure times due to his constant praying.

But the A-List goes on. You also have the good doctor, Luke, mentioned in verse 24, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and who wrote the book of Acts. You also have Timothy, mentioned in verse 1, who was Paul's prized pupil. While Paul considered several men his "sons" in the faith, Timothy was "the son" of Paul, he was first out of all of them. Paul probably loved, trusted, and invested in Timothy more than any others. As a matter of fact, 2 of Paul's letters to Timothy make it into the Bible. This was the A-Team. This was the first string. This team was ranked first among servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel got out to the ancient world because of these men.

But we need to look closely at this group. Because there are several men named here who are tremendously important for Philemon to see. There are two men there who match the caliber of the others. But their lives are pictures of forgiveness for us to see. One man is a living picture of the power of forgiveness in restoring someone to service for Christ. His failure and forgiveness happened in the past. The second man has not yet failed. He will fail in the future, as we read further in the Bible, and therefore he too will need forgiveness at that time. Let us look at the first man.

Profile #1. John Mark. The Power of Forgiveness to Restore.

Our first profile of forgiveness is found in the man named Mark, mentioned in verse 24. Turn with me to Acts 12:12. In Acts 12 we learn 4 things about Mark.

First, he is called both John and Mark (v12).

Second, his mother's name was Mary (v12).

Third, his mother's house is where many believers gathered to pray and worship (v12).

Fourth, Mark personally knew the Apostle Peter. The Apostle may have even had a closer relationship with him since it was his house the church was meeting at - and no doubt where Peter was ministering. Also, speaking of Mark's famous friends, according to Colossians 4:10 Mark was the cousin of Barnabus, a very prominent leader in the early church. But it is this early relationship between Mark and Peter that will be very important to keep in mind as we see what happens with Mark.

At the end of Acts 12 we see Mark is recruited to be part of the ministry Paul and Barnabus were doing. Then, in Acts 13 we see Paul sets out on his 1st missionary journey along with Barnabus and John. They do not get far when it says in Acts 13:13, "***John left them to return to Jerusalem.***" We do not know there is any problem with this until we get to Acts 15:36-40. Turn there with me. In Acts 15 Paul and Barnabus have returned from their 1st missionary journey and Paul proposes they go back to the churches they founded to make sure everyone is doing okay. Let's read what happens.... [Read]

For some reason Mark deserted them. He started out with them but he quit before they really even got started. He didn't go back to Antioch where they started from, he went home to Jerusalem, maybe to his mother's house.

As far as Paul was concerned, Mark could not be relied upon. Maybe he was too young, maybe too timid, too distracted, too homesick, we don't know what it was. Regardless of what it was, Paul did not want him going on the 2nd

missionary journey because he couldn't be trusted to see the mission all the way through. The Lord said in Luke 9:62, "***No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.***"

The argument over whether or not to take Mark along was so intense that it split Paul and Barnabus. In this scene you see two philosophies at work. On the one hand you have Paul, who held a high standard, and who didn't view the mission field as a place to restore another Christian. The mission field is for proven, able, dedicated servants, it is not a place to figure out if its something you want to do. Whatever his view, he definitely felt burned by Mark on their first mission trip and had no use for him on the 2nd trip. He felt so strongly about this that he was willing to part ways with Barnabus, his partner of so long.

On the other hand, Barnabus, whose name means "Encouragement", may have wanted to encourage Mark back into mission work. He probably believed Mark could become useful and just needed coaching and mentoring and discipleship. Perhaps since they were family he was more optimistic, but, nevertheless Barnabus clearly believed Mark was ready for another shot, and was willing to part ways with Paul to give Mark that chance.

That is the story of Mark's failure and the subsequent turn of events. But after his failure he was recovered, restored and reinstated. And it is by God's gracious dealings with him that 2 men took him under their wing. The first, as we've seen is Barnabus, his cousin. At his cousin's side he went on mission trips and matured greatly under Barnabus' leadership.

The second man God used in Mark's life was probably even more instrumental in restoring him. It was a man who personally understood what it meant to fail in a big way and then be restored to service for Christ. This 2nd man was none other than the Apostle Peter. Peter, as we mentioned earlier knew Mark since he was a young man in his mother's house years ago. But listen to what Peter says about Mark many years later at the end of his 1st letter, 1 Peter 5:13, "***She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends her greetings, and so does my son Mark.***"

Whenever you see these guys refer to some other guy as their son, it referred to the special, mentor relationship they had with them. These "sons" were seen and loved as though they were their own children. They invested everything into them to raise them up in the faith. Now why would Peter come alongside Mark and develop this kind of relationship with him?

First, because he had known Mark already for a long time, and perhaps out of an existing relationship Peter cared for the young man whose mother had housed the church and wanted to help Mark.

Secondly, and probably even more important, is that Peter probably saw a lot of himself in Mark. Mark's situation undoubtedly reminded Peter of his own situation a long time ago. Just like Mark, Peter was a young guy once who made a commitment and failed in a big way to live up to it. He told Jesus that if everyone else fell away he would not, even if it meant dying for Jesus. But less than 24 hours later Peter denied even knowing Jesus 3 times.

But someone was there to restore Peter. On the beach, at the end of John's Gospel, Jesus restores him, because with Christ, Peter could be used to do great things in service to the Lord.

We can be sure Peter empathized with Mark in the bitterness of failure, and we can be certain that he would have wanted Mark to experience the blessing of restoration, as he once had. Therefore there is no one more perfectly suited for mentoring Mark and restoring him to useful service in the ministry than Peter.

So, what happened? And why does this have anything to do with Philemon? Well, what Paul is asking Philemon to do is what Paul had to do with Mark. Just like Onesimus ran away from Philemon, Mark ran away from Paul in the middle of a mission trip. Paul somewhere along the way had to forgive Mark. Philemon knew this, and therefore knew Paul was not asking him to do something he was not willing to do himself. He'd been there. He'd been in Philemon's shoes.

And as Philemon saw Mark's name listed there in the letter, he would realize that Paul had not only forgiven Mark. He re-enlisted him into service on his team. You see, when Paul writes this letter to Philemon it is about 62 AD, which is about 12 years after Mark had deserted Paul. And where is Mark at that point? According to Philemon 24, he is with Paul, serving at his side, probably in prison with him, or, close-by serving him in any way Paul needs. Sometime in those 12 years Paul regained confidence in Mark and believed having him on his team was wise. Paul made sure that the church in Colosse accepted Mark because there may have been some resentment leftover towards him for his desertion of Paul. Most salient in all of this though is Paul's words at the end of his life in 2 Timothy 4:11. He writes to Timothy and says, "***Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.***"

There are several applications for us today from Mark's profile.

Application: Paul knew what it took to forgive someone who runs out on you. He had practiced the same thing he was preaching to Philemon. Philemon knew that his good friend had been in his shoes before. We need to be careful that we don't press others to do things that we ourselves are not willing to do. Even more importantly, if we are encouraging someone to follow the Bible's teaching, we need to be humbly sensitive to the difficulty they are in if we ourselves have not been in their position before.

Application #2: Failure does not mean someone is permanently sidelined. A person can make a comeback. It isn't easy for anyone, but, through forgiveness and a long process of restoration it is possible. All that is needed is a lot of humility, dedication, and the guidance of godly leadership and a person can be restored to serving Christ. Notice something that is apparent, although not stated: Mark worked hard to regain credibility. He went on mission trips with his cousin Barnabus and became a disciple of Peter. After time he would have a new track record for people to see that he can be helpful.

Application #3: Ministry is right in front of you. Barnabus had a cousin who needed to be discipled. Peter had a young man in his church who needed mentoring. You can go across the world to serve Christ. Or, you can go across the aisle in church.

At the end of this message I want us to see the healing power of forgiveness. Forgiveness is powerful in putting someone on the path to restoration. Through forgiveness someone has the potential to be useful and helpful again in serving Jesus Christ.

Philemon 24-25

How happy would we be if in life no one ever said or did anything to offend or injure us? If in life everyone else were in continuous harmony with our happiness and goodwill for all our lives how different would our lives be? But we don't live in such a state in this life. We get disappointed. We get hurt. We get let down. We have in the past, and, we will again in the future experience the bitter feelings towards others who harm us.

How much do you think about forgiving someone ahead of time? In other words, have you ever prepared yourself to forgive before the time to forgive came about? I wonder if Paul lived knowing there were going to be more times before he died that he would be faced with forgiving someone for causing him harm.

Why do you ask, Pastor? Because there was a man on Paul's team, listed at the end of this letter to Philemon, who was serving alongside of Paul, but in less than 2 years he was going to walk out on Paul. Like Mark did about 15 years earlier, this man was going to leave Paul hanging when Paul needed him. Who was that man? His name was Demas. Last week we looked at Mark, a man who had failed Paul in the past. This week we are looking at Demas, a man who was going to fail Paul in the future. And it is with this realization that we word our sermon title: Preparing to Forgive.

Demas: Prepare to Forgive

We do not know a whole lot about Demas as he is only mentioned 3 times in Scripture. His name means "governor of the people". He may have been from Thessalonica if 2 Timothy 4:10 is any implication. But when we first learn of Demas he is with Paul in Rome during Paul's first Roman imprisonment. It is during this time, around 63AD, that Paul writes Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and this letter to Philemon. Together they are known as the "Prison Letters".

When Demas is mentioned in Colossians 4:14 Paul doesn't tell us anything about him except that he sends greetings to the Colossian church. In Philemon Paul again mentions Demas and mentions him along with Luke as fellow workers. That of course was no meaningless ascription from Paul. If he called you a fellow worker it meant he considered your work for Jesus Christ and the Gospel to be worthy of honor. If he called you a fellow worker it meant he considered you to be someone working alongside him for the same cause and with the same devotion - and Paul was not easy to keep up with. Philemon was a fellow worker in verse 1 - which endeared him to Paul's heart.

But where Demas is most remembered is in Paul's 2nd letter to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 4:10. Much like the Apostle Thomas has been remembered throughout church history for his doubt, Demas is probably remembered mostly for his defection. About 2 years after calling Demas a "fellow worker", listen as Paul, spending his last days in a Roman imprisonment, informs Timothy of the direction Demas has gone: "***Come to me quickly Timothy, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.***" The Greek word for deserted means to leave someone in the lurch, to abandon, to walk out at the most inappropriate time

Now Paul was not unfamiliar with being deserted. Starting with Mark, Paul has been stung many times by believers who served alongside him. He began this letter mentioning being alone - in 2 Timothy 1:15 he said, "***You know, Timothy, that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.***" The province of Asia included the Ephesians and the Colossians by the way. Of course, betrayal and abandonment seem to be common to NT ministries and Paul would no doubt understand these are part of the sufferings of serving Christ. After all, Jesus Himself was betrayed by Judas and even all the rest of the disciples deserted Him in His most important hour – the hour of His death. Now, here too was Paul about to be killed by the Roman government and one of his closest companions who has served at his side for several years and no doubt someone Paul mentored, up and quits on him. Maybe Demas saw the writing on the wall and knew he was going to lose his life too if he stayed with Paul. Who knows?

Paul has dealt with defection before, he was dealing with it then, and in a particular way he was stung by Demas' desertion. Notice what he says was Demas' motivation for leaving: "...***because he loved this world...***" We need to look at that a moment because through Paul the Holy Spirit is pointing out to us a very important area where as Christians we need to pay attention. It is the area of the world. Demas' love for the world grew enough to the point of his abandoning the ministry. Here's what we need to take to heart ourselves:

First, you cannot love the world and serve God. They are mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, loving the world makes you an enemy of God. James 4:4 says, "***You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.***" Furthermore, James goes on to say that loving the world arouses the jealousy of God, and you put yourself in danger when you do that. Listen to verse 5, "***Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?***" You cannot

love the world and love God. You cannot run after the world and run for God. You must choose. Don't be a Demas.

Second, we need to be careful that we are not seduced by the world. Notice that it wasn't the persecution that caused Demas to quit. He wasn't afraid of the hardships and the attacks and the opposition in the ministry – that isn't what it says that made him leave. His problem was different than fear - but his kind of problem was just as crippling to a believer: he let his heart long for the things of this world. Demas could handle being struck in the face for Jesus Christ, but, couldn't handle being seduced away from Him. He loved what the world offered. He loved what he could get from the world. And so his attraction to the world grew more and more causing his attraction to Jesus diminished. That is always the case. When you love the world you don't love God. First John 2:15 is blunt, ***“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him.”***

As Paul watched Demas go Paul must have been particularly disappointed. Paul spoke of the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ to the Philippians. There is nothing compared to Jesus Christ. There is nothing here on earth in this world that can match Him. He truly is matchless. I love what Nate prayed in Wednesday morning prayer a couple weeks back, *“Christ exceeds everything the world has to offer.”*

I'm sure Paul wish Demas would have believed that.

Thirdly, any of us are capable of doing what Demas did.

Where is all this leading to? Well, as we read Paul's letter to Philemon we realize what's coming down the road in Paul's life. He is going to be abandoned by someone close to him. Was he going to be ready to forgive? That's our point today: we need to be ready to forgive. We need to prepare ourselves with the realization that there will come times when we need to extend forgiveness to someone. People will fail us, hurt us, disappoint us, let us down and cause us frustration.

We need to exercise some caution here though: This does not mean we become cynical. This does not mean we expect everyone to always let us down. I know this contradicts what I just said, but, I'm comfortable making this contradiction. We understand people are sinners but let us not live waiting for them to sin. Love hopes for the best. I would rather hope for the best and be hurt

by someone's failure, instead of expecting the worst all the time and being surprised when someone comes through.

Expect that you will have to give forgiveness someday. But don't let that make you live cynically.

Conclusion: The Possibility of Forgiveness

Let's just conclude with this point: The Possibility of Forgiveness. When I say Possibility, I am not referring to the potential that someone might grant forgiveness. When I say the Possibility of Forgiveness I am referring to the possibilities that arise in someone's life when forgiveness *is* granted. There is the possibility of fellowship being restored between two people who were against each other. There is the possibility of the forgiver and the forgiven to flourish in their faith once guilt and bitterness are removed. There is the possibility to excel in service to Jesus Christ with peace and unity between believers restored.

That is what happened in Mark's life. He started out badly, but ended wonderfully. His is a picture of the God-glorifying possibilities that come from forgiveness. We should not miss the power of forgiveness in restoring someone to a life of glorifying God and serving Jesus Christ.

But, what happened to Onesimus, the man for whom this letter was written in the first place? What happened to him? We may have a hint coming from a letter written about 50 years later. While on his way from Smyrna to Rome in order to be martyred, the church Father Ignatius wrote a letter to the Ephesian church. He never met the congregation in Ephesus, but, he met their pastor. Listen to what he says to this church he has never met regarding their pastor, "*I received your large congregation in the person of Onesimus, your pastor, a man whose love is beyond words.*"

Was this the same Onesimus in Paul's letter to Philemon from 50 years earlier? If so what a remarkable turnout for a man who started as a runaway slave but ended as a faithful servant of the Lord. And if it was the same Onesimus then does this indicate to us that Philemon did forgive him? And in forgiving him did he free him from slavery so he could go and serve Jesus Christ – perhaps returning to Paul's side and eventually leading the church in Ephesus?

This whole letter is a letter about love, love expressed in forgiveness. Could it be that the love beyond words Ignatius experienced from Onesimus was the love that was demonstrated to him so long ago from his master Philemon? If so, then it shows us the incredible possibilities that can come from forgiveness.

And furthermore, Paul's very last words to Philemon were the perfect ending to a letter on forgiveness: "***The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.***" With the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ with Philemon's spirit, he would be able to extend grace to Onesimus. With the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with us, we too will be able to extend grace through forgiveness to others.