

## CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

### (2) WHY FORGIVE?

Philemon

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#### PROLOGUE

Actions can speak louder than words. Mary Chambers tells about a man who was trying to be more diligent about witnessing as he was standing in the "10 Items or Less" checkout at the grocery store. "All have sinned," he began, sincerely looking at the clerk scanning his items. "Including you, Mac," she said, without looking up, "I count seventeen items here."

#### SCRIPTURE

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, {2} to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: {3} Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {4} When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God {5} because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. {6} I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. {7} I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. {8} For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, {9} yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love--and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. {10} I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. {11} Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. {12} I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. {13} I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; {14} but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. {15} Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, {16} no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother--especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. {17} So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. {18} If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. {19} I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your

own self. {20} Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. {21} Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. {22} One thing more--prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. {23} Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, {24} and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. {25} The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (Philemon NRSV).

## **INTRODUCTION**

The brief New Testament book known as Philemon is actually a personal letter of appeal by Paul on behalf of a runaway slave by the name of Onesimus. Apparently, Onesimus had fled from Philemon's household, possibly after stealing something that belonged to Philemon (18). As a fugitive he somehow met up with Paul, and was led by him to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul then convinced Onesimus to return to Philemon, bearing this letter with him.

The request in the letter, when understood in its totality, is extraordinary. Not only does Paul want Philemon to take no vindictive action against Onesimus, he also wants Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in Christ, set him free, and send him back to Paul to be a partner in the Gospel ministry!

Why does Paul think he can make such a request? Paul could have made his appeal to Philemon on the basis of their friendship. He could have tied his request to the fact that Philemon owed Paul a huge favor. For that matter, Paul could have ordered Philemon to do this on the basis of his authority as an Apostle. Instead, he wanted Philemon to be motivated by the love of Christ within himself. This is the chief message of the letter.

But I also want to point out that seasoned throughout the letter are practical reasons why Philemon or any other injured party would benefit from forgiveness. And this is why this letter was chosen in connection with the second topic in the "Conversations About Forgiveness" series. Last week we looked at the nature of forgiveness. Next week we will examine learning how to forgive. Today we consider the benefits of forgiveness.

### **1. BENEFITS FOR SELF**

Paul suggests that Philemon will be a better and more effective person if he forgives Onesimus (6). Modern science supports this theory. Everett Worthington points out:

Until fairly recently there was little research to substantiate the tangible benefits of forgiveness. In the past decade, however, interest in the topic has exploded both inside and outside academia. Researchers are exploring

the role of forgiveness in our health, well-being, and relationships, and in healing intergroup conflict. Through their research, they are finding effective ways to bring this practice into many aspects of our lives. Good evidence associates forgiveness with emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Research has shown that forgiveness can reduce depression and anger, increases hopefulness and self-confidence, and helps improve the health of marriages and families.<sup>1</sup>

It is healthy to forgive. If someone wrongs us in some way we naturally get angry. But if we hang on to this anger and nurture it into bitterness, then it can consume us. Forgiveness does not mean you condone the action but that you release its power over you. Besides, it does no good to hang on to bitterness. It leaves you with sleepless nights, an upset stomach, and a life of escalating misery. Meanwhile, the person you are angry with may be oblivious to the situation and has continued on their merry way.

We need to appreciate that the primary beneficiary of forgiveness is not the person who caused the hurt but the one who offers the forgiveness. Forgiveness frees us from an emotional prison. Forgiveness means you recognize that you cannot improve your past but you can widen your future.

## **2. BENEFITS FOR OTHERS**

Forgiveness can benefit others. There can be an obvious benefit for the person who receives forgiveness. But the circle of influence can be even wider than that. In the Philemon story it caused at least a 300% increase in friendships.

Onesimus, Paul and Philemon each faced a difficult situation. Under Roman law, slaves were considered disposable property. The head of a household could lawfully slay his slaves. But this seldom happened in practice unless a member of the household was murdered or a slave escaped. Onesimus faced severe punishment or even death if he returned to Philemon. Paul was already under a kind of house arrest for his evangelistic work. If he got caught helping an escaped slave, he faced more serious penalties. Meanwhile, Philemon faced the scorn of society and rejection by his affluent peers if he failed to punish Onesimus.

Most people reading this letter assume that the only person who had a forgiveness issue was Philemon. But if you think about it then you will realize this cannot be. Philemon was not the only person in the story to face the challenge of forgiveness. He was not

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<sup>1</sup>Worthington, Everett L., ed. *A Handbook of Forgiveness* (New York: Brunner-Routledge 2005) and *Conversations about Forgiveness* Facilitator Guide, p. 9.

even the *first* person in the story to face the challenge of forgiveness. That would have fallen on Onesimus. Some commentators get to this point in the passage and raise the question, “Could Philemon forgive the man who stole his property?” But the more significant question is, “Could Onesimus forgive the man who stole his life?” Somehow Paul persuaded Onesimus to forgive his former master. I can’t imagine all that must have gone through his mind. How could you return to someone who bought and sold human beings like cattle?

The New Testament does not comment on the origin of slavery nor does it provide justification for human beings owning other human beings even though it does provide evidence that some early Christians were slaves and some were slave holders. On the other hand, it does not call for a social revolution to abolish slavery nor does it promote a slave uprising. The focus instead is on transforming personal relationships that lead to freedom.

Paul’s letter went beyond other documents of the era in not only pleading for mercy for an escaped slave but asking that he be set free because he was now a Christian. So powerful was this precedent that many early American slave holders did not want their slaves exposed to the Gospel, for fear that they would have to free them. Only later was the Christian message distorted into something that could justify the continuation of slavery.<sup>2</sup>

Today, many consider the Letter to Philemon to be the seed that split the rock of slavery. It demands an answer to the question, “Are you willing to treat people differently than the world treats them for the sake of the love you have experienced in Jesus Christ?” For Paul, Philemon and Onesimus the answer was “Yes.” May that be true for us as well.

### **3. BENEFITS FOR THE CAUSE**

As followers of Christ we also need to recognize the influence that forgiveness has on our witness to the world. Even just talking about the importance of forgiveness can have a ripple effect as evidenced by two different articles on the subject in the Monday and Tuesday editions of the Battle Creek Enquirer. Tuesday’s (Sept 27, 2011) “Stray Talk” column was given the headline, “Forgiveness about You, Not Them.” One of the writers, Bob Warner, reveals what triggered the column. He says: “Local churches have embarked on a series of get-togethers with a theme of forgiveness.” He was talking about us!

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<sup>2</sup>(see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1978]).

The other writer, Eric Greene, has obviously done some research about what we have been covering because he says:

“To forgive, we have to surrender our gut instinct to even the score, to exact revenge. But remember that forgiveness isn't about changing the behavior of someone else. It's about allowing yourself to feel peace, particularly in those areas of your life that have withered as the angst burned inside you. And once you have that peace, the doors to empathy, improved relationships, foresight and compassion open widely.”

One could argue that it was forgiveness that first started to change Saul, the enemy of Christ, into Paul, the ambassador for Christ. Listen to this account of how Stephen was martyred:

Then they dragged [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him (Acts 7:58-8:1 NRSV).

It must have haunted Saul that Stephen was so forgiving. Later, Saul discovered the real power behind that forgiveness when he met the Risen Christ on the way to Damascus. Saul became the Apostle Paul and helped thousands of people find peace with God.

One such person was the runaway Onesimus. Onesimus not only became a Christian after he met Paul, but he also joined in the work of spreading the Good News of Christ to others. This wonderful transformation also became the occasion for a piece of dry wit from the Apostle. He says of Onesimus:

Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me (11).

The name Onesimus means “useful.” So Paul makes a play on words by saying, in effect, “Before he was *not* Onesimus but now he *is* Onesimus.” The love of Christ had changed him into the real Onesimus. Christ can do the same for anyone.

Paul tells us in the Acts of the Apostles:

“The most important thing is that I complete my mission, the work that the Lord Jesus gave me - to tell people the Good News about God's grace”

(Acts 20:24 NCV).

This is the greatest cause the world has ever known. As Christ followers we have the privilege to share in this work. But the Lord wants us to share his love and grace with others not out of reluctance or because we feel our arm is being twisted but out of joyful gratitude for what Christ has done for us. By the grace of God we have been forgiven and can demonstrate the power of forgiveness to a world in need.

### **CONCLUSION**

Whatever happened to Onesimus? About fifty years after Paul wrote to Philemon, Ignatius of Antioch, one of the great Christian martyrs, was taken to Rome to be executed. During the journey he wrote many letters including one to the bishop of the Church in Ephesus. The bishop's name was Onesimus. Coincidence? Perhaps. But many think it is the same person. Ignatius wrote to him, using the same dry humor as Paul: "Onesimus by name, Onesimus by nature." Ignatius described him as man always doing things for the sake of love. We also know that Paul's letters were collected first at Ephesus. Most of these were meant to minister to entire congregations, even when addressed to individuals. One and only one personal letter was added to the collection: the Letter to Philemon. It was as if Onesimus wanted the whole world to know that he was once a runaway slave set free in heart, mind and body by the love of Jesus Christ.