



EBC 2019 FALL BIBLE STUDY

FORGIVENESS

Paul's Letter to Philemon



Rev. Christopher L Nichols, Pastor

Philemon: **Background**

- The Roman Empire, like most of the ancient world, was a slave-based society.
- Slaves made up something like 25-35% of the empire's 60 million people.
- The emperor alone might own thousands.
- From the earliest days, a slave-owner could inflict any injury or punishment upon a slave that he wanted.
- There was no crime for doing harm to a slave.

Philemon: **Background**

- On the other hand, if a slave murdered his or her master, all the slaves in the household were to be killed.
- When convicted of a serious crime, a slave might be crucified.
- Around 73 BC there was a huge slave uprising led by a Thracian named Spartacus.

Philemon: **Background**

- He soon led an army that repeatedly defeated the armies of Rome and controlled much of southern Italy.
- Unfortunately, they were stuck on the end of the Italian peninsula and were never able to leave Italy to go to their homelands.
- Finally, in 71 BC the Roman senate raised a huge army to contend with Spartacus.

Philemon: **Background**

- This army won and took 6,000 slaves prisoner.
- They were crucified along the Appian Way – the main road leading into Rome.
- Their bodies remained hanging in place for several months.
- This was a warning to other slaves who might think about rebelling against their masters.

Philemon: **Background**

- Fast-forward now to about 62 A.D.
- Nothing has changed regarding the status of slaves in the Roman world.
- In Colossae in the Eastern empire, a slave named Onesimus escaped from his master Philemon.
- He ran away and eventually made it to Rome.

Philemon: **Background**

- As it happened, Paul led Philemon the slave-owner to Christ while both were in Ephesus a few years before.
- As it also happened, Onesimus the slave somehow encountered Paul, now a prisoner under house arrest, while in Rome.
- Paul then had the privilege of leading the slave Onesimus to Christ.

Philemon: **Background**

- Onesimus the slave remained in Rome for some time serving Paul the apostle/prisoner, who became his pastor, mentor and friend.
- But Paul knew the story could not end there.
- Onesimus was a fugitive with no legal status in Rome.
- Additionally, Paul saw the need for reconciliation between Onesimus the slave and Philemon the slave-owner.

Philemon: **Background**

- Onesimus needed to get up the courage to go back to Colossae and face Philemon so that the two might be reconciled
- They were now both brothers in Christ.
- Philemon needed to learn the beautiful and beneficial Christian art of forgiveness.
- The only way to learn forgiveness is to forgive.

Philemon: **Background**

- Paul writes to Philemon as the advocate of Onesimus.
- He asks Philemon to receive him, forgive him and potentially even free him.
- This is more than a recommendation.
- Paul promises to pay Philemon anything Onesimus may owe.

Philemon: Textual Observations

- **1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus**
- Paul considers his imprisonment in light of the sovereignty of God.
- He does not blame the Romans or the Jews.
- He credits his humble position to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
- Paul sees his imprisonment as a part of God's plan for him at this time.

Philemon: Examining the Text

- **2** Apphia is apparently Philemon's wife.
- **Archippus** is apparently Philemon's son, but he also seems to be the pastor or leader of the church.
 - See Colossians 4:17
- **4-7** Paul uses a good deal of text telling Philemon how highly he thinks of him and the importance of his ministry to other believers.

Philemon: Examining the Text

- If you do a good job hosting a home Bible study, then you have a similar reinforcement from Paul.
 - See what he says in v.6.
- Don't ever minimize the importance of such a ministry of hospitality to the spiritual growth and benefit of the church.

Philemon: Examining the Text

- **8-16** This is where Paul explains to Philemon what happened to Onesimus.
- In the Roman world, citizens like Paul (and perhaps Philemon) had the highest status.
- Other free people came next, but did not enjoy the all the benefits of citizenship.
- Slaves were subhuman.

Philemon: Examining the Text

- But in the church, Philemon and Onesimus were both brothers in the Lord.
- He was returning not simply as a slave, but as an equal member of the church.
 - See also Colossians 4:7-9
- Paul's point in **v.16** is that Onesimus should be more valuable to Philemon than to Paul since he was once part of his own household.

Philemon: Examining the Text

- 17-22 Here Paul drives his request home.
- He is asking Philemon for three things:
 - Receive him 17
 - Forgive him 18-19
 - Free him? 21 - and look back at 12-14

Historical Data on Slavery

- Christianity is sometimes blamed for the problem of slavery in the ancient world, or more often in the USA.
- **Fact:** the condition of slaves in the Roman Empire began to improve only after the spread of Christianity – especially after the conversion of Constantine.

Historical Data on Slavery

- While the USA certainly could have done more to give freedom to slaves and could have done it more quickly, consider the following:
 - Slavery was never legal in Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Maine, Iowa, Oregon, California and other states which entered the union as free states.
 - **1777** Vermont
 - **1783** Massachusetts and New Hampshire
 - **1863** Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation

Historical Data on Slavery

- How does that stack up with some other countries around the world?
- When was slavery abolished in other places?

▪ 1906 China	– 1959 Tibet
▪ 1921 Nepal	– 1960 Niger Rep.
▪ 1922 Morocco	– 1962 Saudi Arabia
▪ 1923 Afghanistan	– 1962 Yemen
▪ 1928 Iran	– 1970 Oman
▪ 1942 Ethiopia	– 1981 Mauritania

Historical Data on Slavery

- That information does not excuse the sins of American slave traders or slave owners.
- It is only intended to remind us that our country is not alone in its guilt.
- The injustice caused by slavery is widespread just as sin is common to the entire human race.
- And sadly, though illegal, slavery still exists today and is perhaps more evil than ever.

Philemon: **Application**

From the perspective of **Paul**:

- Paul was unjustly imprisoned, but not bitter over his circumstances.
- He was willing to humbly submit to God in his time of difficulty.
- This is not easy, but this kind of humble submission may be a necessary part of our Christian growth.

Philemon: **Application**

From the perspective of **Paul**:

- Paul was willing to stand behind Onesimus who was at a difficult point in his life.
- Onesimus had proven himself to Paul.
- Paul gave him more than a good reference, he was willing to back up his words by saying he would pay Philemon whatever Onesimus owed him.

Philemon: **Application**

From the perspective of **Paul**:

- Sometimes God puts people in our lives simply so that we can help them.
- We may find ourselves in the position to be someone's advocate as Paul was able to be for Onesimus.
- Paul's resources and abilities were severely limited, but he still did whatever he could.

Philemon: **Application**

From the perspective of **Onesimus**:

- The first thing Onesimus did was prove the reality of his conversion to Paul.
- His name means “profitable” or “useful” and he made himself useful to Paul.
- The best way to get good references behind you is to make yourself valuable to others.
- People will (normally) appreciate your faithfulness.

Philemon: **Application**

From the perspective of **Onesimus**:

- “The Synagogue of the Freedmen” in **Acts 6:9** shows us that Jerusalem alone was home to many freed slaves.
- There were legal means of being set free in the Roman world, but simply running away was not one of them.
 - Onesimus now needed to boldly face Philemon as a brother in the Lord.

Philemon: **Application**

From the perspective of **Onesimus**:

- Have you wronged someone who now needs you to openly admit what you have done?
- If we are willing to do whatever it takes to make amends, this will go a long way toward reconciliation.
- (But it might not be wise to confess all your secret sins. I really don't want to know all the bad things you have ever thought about me!)

Philemon: Application

From the perspective of **Philemon**:

- **Forgiveness** is the biggest lesson in this letter.
- Philemon had the legal right to literally do anything he wanted to get back at Onesimus without getting in the least bit of trouble.
- But as a Christian brother Philemon was obligated to forgive.
- What's more the whole church was watching.

Philemon: **Application**

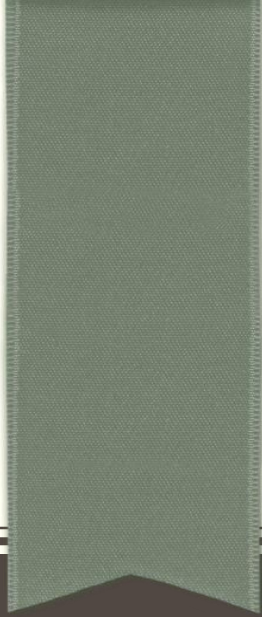
From the perspective of **Philemon**:

- If we are holding any grudges, harboring any bitterness, refusing to let go of some past hurt, then we are only stunting our own spiritual growth.
- Refusing to forgive is like taking poison in the hope that it kills somebody else.

Philemon: **Application**

From the perspective of **Philemon**:

- Please take some time to examine your heart, consider your hurts and be willing to simply let them go.
- Your integrity as a Christian depends on it.
- Keep in mind that we owe Christ so much more than we can possibly ever repay.
 - See **Matthew 18:21-35**



CONCLUSION
