Philemon

The theme of forgiveness is central to the Bible. The greatest forgiveness every person needs is forgiveness from God for their sin. God provided forgiveness through the cross of Jesus Christ for all who believe (Matt. 26:28; Heb. 9:22). As believers, we are called to live out that reality in our lives by forgiving one another, just as we have been forgiven by God (Eph. 4:32). Although forgiveness is the theme of the letter of Philemon, the word *forgive* is never mentioned in the letter. Paul wrote this letter to his good friend, Philemon, from prison in Rome. Philemon had a runaway slave, Onesimus, who had most likely stolen some money from him and fled to Rome. After meeting Paul in Rome, Onesimus was saved, and Paul urged him to go back to Philemon and be united to him as a brother in Christ. Although there is no direct theological instruction on forgiveness in this letter, there is one appeal that Paul makes as the basis for forgiveness—love. Let's dive in and see how love motivates forgiveness and unity in the body of Christ.

➢ **Context**

- Philemon was most likely saved in Ephesus under the preaching of Paul (Acts 19–20).

- Paul is writing this letter during his first imprisonment in Rome (vv. 1, 9).

- Philemon lived in Colossae (Col. 4:7–9, 17).

- Paul was informed about the condition of the church at Colossae by Epaphras (v. 23; Col. 1:7-8).

- Philemon had a runaway slave, Onesimus, who most likely stole money from him and fled to Rome (Phlm. 10–12, 18).

- Onesimus had broken Roman law and defrauded his master which gave Philemon the right to severely punish or even kill Onesimus under Roman law.

- Onesimus met Paul in Rome and became a Christian.

- The letters of Philemon and Colossians were sent back to Colossae with Tychicus and Onesimus (Col. 4:7–9).

➢ **Read Philemon 1–3**

1. In verse 1, what two ways does Paul describe Philemon?

2. According to verse 2, where did the church at Colossae meet?

➢ **Read Philemon 4–7**

    3. In verses 4–5, what two characteristics of Philemon has Paul heard about?

    4. In verse 6, what is Paul's prayer request for Philemon?

    5. According to verse 7, what has brought "joy and comfort" to Paul?

        Application: Tell of a time when you have been refreshed by another believer's love toward you? What are ways you can grow in love for your brothers and sisters in Christ?

➢ **Read Philemon 8–16**

    6. In verse 8, what could Paul have done to Philemon?

    7. In verse 9, on what basis did Paul make his appeal?

    8. In verses 10–11, who is Paul making an appeal for? Why?

9. In verses 12–14, what did Paul want to do with Onesimus? Why didn't he do it?

10. In verses 15–16, what is Paul's explanation for the situation? How does this show God's providence in Onesimus's life? (see Gen. 50:20).

11. In verse 16, how did the gospel change the slave-master relationship between Onesimus and Philemon? (see Eph. 6:5–9)

Application: How does Onesimus's experience show the power of the gospel in the life of sinners? How does this give you hope?

➢ **Read Philemon 17–21**

12. In verse 17, what is Paul's final request to Philemon?

13. In verses 18–19, how does Paul show his desire for forgiveness and restoration between Philemon and Onesimus?

Application: Paul essentially says to Philemon regarding the debt of Onesimus, "Put that on my bill." How does this reflect the gospel in Christ?

14. In verse 20, how will a restored relationship affect Paul as the spiritual leader of Philemon and Onesimus?

15. What does verse 21 reveal about the relationship between Paul and Philemon?

➢ **Read Philemon 22–25**

16. In verse 22, what is Paul's desire when he is released from prison?

17. In verse 23, Paul mentions Epaphras who was the founder of the Colossian church (Col. 1:7). What is his condition during the time of Paul's writing?

18. In verse 24, Paul mentions Mark. How would this relationship be an example to Philemon? (see Acts 15:36 – 41)

Application: Why is forgiveness so important in the body of Christ? What does this show the watching world?

Application: What one verse impacted you the most in this study? Explain.