

## Forgiveness under Grace---Philemon 15-25

### *Introduction, background and outline*

- **Scripture reading:** Philemon.
- **Background:** Philemon's home was the gathering place of the Colossian Church. Onesimus was the runaway slave from Philemon's house. He fled to Rome, met Paul, and was saved by faith in the Lord. Now, Onesimus was sent by Paul back to his master's family, so they could experience true repentance and forgiveness in the Lord.
- **Introduction:** On forgiveness – the world says: Tit for tat is fair play. Jesus: “(Forgive your brother) up to seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). The core of the gospel is forgiveness of sin. Our God is a God who “will abundantly pardon” and is “ready to forgive” (Isaiah 55:7; Psalm 86:5). The significance of forgiveness: first, any sin is an offense to God (Psalm 51:4); second, failure to forgive hinders worship (Matthew 5:23-24); third, unforgiveness is Satan's trick to harm the church (Ephesians 4:26-27; 2 Corinthians 2:10-11); fourth, forgiveness directly relates to one's salvation (Matthew 6:14-15; 18:35).
- **Outline:**
  - Title: Forgiveness under Grace
  - A. The Character of Forgiveness
    - 1. A Life Marked by Grace
    - 2. A Grasp on God's Sovereignty
    - 3. An Eternal Perspective
  - B. The Action of Forgiveness
    - 1. Full Reception of the Offender
    - 2. Full Cancellation of the Debt
  - C. The Motivation of Forgiveness
    - 1. Refreshing the Saints' Heart
    - 2. Obedience to the Lord
    - 3. Accountability of Spiritual Leaders
    - 4. Fellowship within the Church
    - 5. The Grace of the Lord

### **A. The Character of Forgiveness (vv 4-7, vv 5-16)**

#### 1. *A Life Marked by Grace I (vv4-7)*

- Philemon's life is taken hold of by God's grace. He has faith in the Lord, love for the saints, and a continuously growing life. All of these are results of Christ's saving grace working in his life. See the last sermon.

## 2. *A Grasp on God's Sovereignty (v15)*

- **“For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever:”** Paul invites Philemon to consider God's sovereignty. Though it seems like a really bad thing, maybe God will use it to bring out something beautiful. It's like what Joseph said to his brothers who sold him (Gen. 50:20). If Philemon can see God's good will in His sovereignty, he will be ready to respond properly. Even when you don't see how in the world God can bring anything good out of a terrible situation, keep in mind that:

**Romans 8:28-29** “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God ..... He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.”

## 3. *An Eternal Perspective (vv15-16)*

- **“that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but ..., a beloved brother:”** Brothers and sisters are members of an eternal family. We will share the joy of living with the Lord for eternity. Paul says, think about it, you lose a slave temporarily, but gain a brother forever! You lose a servant temporarily, and gain a family member forever. With this eternal perspective, it will not be difficult to forgive Onesimus. The reason the world does not know forgiveness is to a large extent because all they care about is the gain and loss of this life.
- **“both in the flesh and in the Lord:”** both in terms of practical living and in terms of spiritual reality. The idea is similar to the relationship between the universal church and the local church. Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon's home, and they would have a more direct life connection in their lives and in the church to express their close brotherhood.

## **B. The Action of Forgiveness (vv17-19)**

### 1. *Full Reception of the Offender (v17)*

- **“Accept him:”** Not just a formal reception, but a full reception in relation, in attitude, and in action. Often used to describe the Lord's reception of believers and the reception of believers of each other. The former is the basis of the latter.

**Romans 15:7** “Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.”

Jesus's reception of believers is complete, without any reservation. (John 6:37, 14:2-3).

- **“If then you regard me a partner, ... as you would me:”** If Paul would visit in person, Philemon would be sure to clean up, prepare meals, and welcome him warmly with joy and enthusiasm. Paul wants Philemon to accept Onesimus in the same way because they had the same brotherhood in the Lord.

Paul did not mention his apostleship, but his identity as Philemon's “partner.” The Greek word comes from the root for “fellowship,” signifying a common part in the life of Christ. The Christian's spiritual relationship in the Lord is the driving force for forgiveness. Forgiveness is not an end in itself, the goal is relationship. God forgives us so we can be reconciled to Him.

**2 Corinthians 5:19** “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

Many people’s forgiveness looks like this: I forgive you, but let’s keep some distance in the future. Forgiveness in the Lord is unreserved reception because we know the Lord forgives us the same way.

Of course, this principle is not always applicable. If it is a serious and public sin that affects the holiness and unity of the church, it is necessary to point it out to the sinner in love and call him to repentance. If necessary, church disciplines must be carried out according to biblical teaching. But if it is just a trivial, personal offense that does not affect the holiness and unity of the church, it should be fully and completely forgiven in the Lord, not to allow it to have any negative impact on the relationship between believers.

## 2. *Full Cancellation of the Debt (vv 18-19)*

- **“But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account:”**

The loss Onesimus caused Philemon may have included the traveling expense he stole and the price of buying another slave in his place. This statement implies Philemon has a right to require compensation. Forgiveness does not mean there shouldn’t be compensation (Romans 13:8). The offender should want to make up for the loss as an expression of genuine repentance.

But this does not mean paying off the material loss is a requirement of forgiveness. We will never be able to repay Christ what we owe Him, yet He forgives us anyway. Paul does not forbid Philemon to demand compensation, but rather he stimulates his love so that he’d want to imitate Christ in forgiving others.

- **“I will repay it:”** Do you see a resemblance to Jesus? We have sinned against a holy and righteous God, a debt we can never repay; but Jesus paid all the debt of sin for believers on the cross! Paul said, let me pay it for you—this is the life of Christ showing through him.

Paul wants Philemon to think about the price the Lord has paid for us, thereby stimulating him to deal with this debt in a better way.

- **“You owe to me even your own self as well:”** Philemon was saved because of Paul’s ministry. Hey, don’t forget that you owe me your whole new life! Without me, you wouldn’t have the life you have today!

So when Philemon places Onesimus’ debt under Paul’s name, he has to cancel it, for Philemon himself owes Paul a debt he can never repay. Onesimus owes Philemon a small amount of earthly money; Philemon owes Paul a priceless soul!

Ultimately, our lives are indebted to the Lord Jesus. “The wages of sin is death,” and Paul himself was a sinner. The only one eligible to take away our sin and give us life is the Lord Jesus Christ who died and rose again for us. Paul is almost playing the role of Christ here, as if Christ Himself comes to Philemon and asks him to put the debt on Christ’s account and then to cancel it for the debt he owed Christ.

This is why it's totally unacceptable that Christians don't forgive one another. This is why Jesus says "if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." The debt we owe Christ is something we can never repay, and our whole life is owed to him. If we hold on to the sins of our brothers/sisters who have been forgiven by Christ and we refuse to forgive them, it really breaks Christ's heart.

## **C. The Motivation of Forgiveness (vv 20-25)**

### 1. *Refreshing the Saints' Heart (v20)*

- **“Refresh my heart in Christ:”** The word “heart” appears three times. In verse 7, “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through [Philemon]”; in verse 12, Onesimus was Paul’s “heart.” Paul is sending his own heart (Onesimus) back to Philemon; so in verse 20, Paul asks Philemon to treat this “heart” well. If you refresh him, you’ve refreshed my heart.

### 2. *Obedience to the Lord (v21)*

- **“Having confidence in your obedience:”** Not obedience to Paul. Paul didn’t use his apostolic authority to command anything. He only made a plea of love (v. 9). But Jesus explicitly asks Christians to forgive one another (cf. Introduction). Paul trusts Philemon would obey the Lord.
- **“You will do even more than what I say:”** The pursuit of Christian excellence has no limit. Philemon might throw a feast to celebrate Onesimus’ return, or perhaps share some ministry opportunities with him. Forgiveness is merely the bottom line. Obedience to the Lord isn’t just about meeting the minimum requirement, but to pursue continuous growth in the Lord.

### 3. *Accountability of Spiritual Leaders (v22)*

- **“Prepare me a lodging:”** By the way, I’m coming to see you soon! So, don’t let me down. This is not a threat, but spiritual accountability. The Lord has established spiritual leaders in the church as overseers to help believers walk in the Lord.

### 4. *Fellowship within the Church (vv 23-24)*

- **“Greet you:”** Greeting with names reflects the intimate fellowship of saints and is an expression of love among Christians. Loving one another inevitably leads to mutual forgiveness (1 Peter 4:8). If unforgiveness exists, this fellowship will be hindered, and there won’t be sincere greetings either.

### 5. *The Grace of the Lord (v25)*

- **“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit:”** The motivation for forgiveness ultimately comes from the grace of Christ. The conclusion of the Christian life is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our life begins with the Lord Jesus’s grace to forgive our sins; it is sustained by His grace; and it overcomes sin and is progressively sanctified all by His grace.