

Restoration
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Philemon 8-21

When the Apostle Paul wrote to his friend and fellow Christ-follower Philemon, his goal was restoration and reconciliation between a victim and an offender. Before there can be restoration or reconciliation, there must be forgiveness.

Here are some statements about forgiveness from a purely human perspective:

- Forgiveness isn't fun
- Forgiveness doesn't seem fair
- Forgiveness seems foolish
- Forgiveness can be frightening

Those may be accurate, human responses to this idea of forgiving someone who has wronged us, but Christ-followers are held to a higher standard. Alexander Pope famously wrote, "*To err is human; to forgive, divine.*" Forgiveness is divine because forgiveness is what Jesus purchased for us on the cross.

Here is the truth that should change us: Forgiveness is NOT our natural reaction when we've been hurt, exploited, or damaged, but Jesus commands His followers to forgive others because HE has forgiven us.

Some quick facts about this little letter from Paul to Philemon:

- Paul wrote from prison to Philemon a lay-leader in Colossae.
- The letter was also intended for Apphia (likely Philemon's wife) and Archippus (possibly Philemon's son.) This church met in their home.
- The subject matter was their runaway slave named Onesimus.
- Onesimus fled his master Philemon likely also stealing money from him.

- God orchestrated Onesimus meeting Paul in Rome, being saved by Christ, and serving Paul, living up to the meaning of his name: “Useful.”
- Trusting Christ reconciled Onesimus to God but it didn’t change his status as a runaway slave and thief – a fugitive in the eyes of the Roman Empire.
- In verses four through seven, Paul affirmed Philemon for his faith in Christ, and his love and service to Jesus and the “saints” in Colossae. Paul’s words about Philemon were no doubt sincere, but they might have also been designed to soften a bruised heart before making a big request.
- With the words, *“Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, ...your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God’s people.”* Paul launches into his real reason for writing.

Philemon 8–21 (NLT) — 8 That is why I am boldly asking a favor of you. I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do. **9** But because of our love, I prefer simply to ask you. Consider this as a request from me—Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus.

10 I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison. **11** Onesimus hasn’t been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us. **12** I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart. **13** I wanted to keep him here with me while I am in these chains for preaching the Good News, and he would have helped me on your behalf. **14** But I didn’t want to do anything without your consent. I wanted you to help because you were willing, not because you were forced. **15** It seems you lost Onesimus for a little while so that you could have him back forever. **16** He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother 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 it to me. **19** I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it. And I won’t mention that you owe me your very soul! **20** Yes, my brother, please do me this favor for the Lord’s sake. Give me this encouragement in Christ. **21** I am confident as I write this letter that you will do what I ask and even more!

- As a saved servant of Christ, Onesimus was Paul's "spiritual child."
- As an Apostle, Paul could have demanded. Why did he ask as a favor?
- Forgiveness must be genuine and from the heart, not by coercion.
- We said forgiveness doesn't seem fair. Paul didn't minimize what Onesimus had done (V.11, 18.) This was no small matter. A runaway slave could be punished up to and including execution in that culture.
- Paul asked more than just being restoring Onesimus as a slave. Paul's request was: *"Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord."* Restore a runaway slave and thief as a "brother?" That's not fair! Who said forgiveness was fair?
- We said forgiveness seems foolish. Philemon was presented with a "double dilemma" in this request: When someone has wronged us greatly, our decision to forgive involves our reputation in front of others.
- What would people think? What would they say? How would other slaves react? Philemon risked looking foolish within local society.
- On the other hand, Paul said Onesimus was "no longer a slave but a beloved brother" in Christ. If Philemon rejected Paul's request, what would it do to his testimony as the faithful leader of this "house church?"
- We said forgiveness can be frightening. Paul really took a risk because he not only sent a letter, verse twelve says, he sent ONESIMUS! You have to believe that this newly converted slave's heart was beating fast!
- By law Onesimus might have faced death. Paul could have simply protected him in silence, but he knew this runaway slave had to face the person he had harmed. Risky or not, Onesimus had to "face the music."
- When we need forgiveness and reconciliation we shouldn't delay.

- Jesus said if you are in a worship service and remember a broken relationship, leave and go immediately and be reconciled. (Matt.5:23)
- Harboring unforgiveness can hinder our worship of God.
- Here's another reality about forgiveness: Forgiveness isn't FREE. Forgiveness costs someone. Paul said in verse eighteen he would personally pay, whatever Onesimus owed to Philemon (due to theft.)
- This is a key point. When harm has been done, it has cost the victim something and someone has to pay restitution. Paul offered to pay.
- Paul cleverly said in the next sentence: *"I won't mention that you owe me your very soul, Philemon. You know Christ because of my influence but if you feel you need to collect damages I'll pay."* Nice move, Paul!
- There is a larger narrative behind this personal request for reconciliation and restoration. This wasn't just about Onesimus and Philemon.
- A law-breaking rebel running from the master. A cost for his transgressions he couldn't pay being paid by another. Being restored not as a slave but as a brother. An offender who was formerly "useless" can be made "useful." Does this sound familiar? This is the gospel!
- Martin Luther wrote: *'All of us are Onesimuses!'*ⁱⁱ Jesus paid the cost of forgiveness and presents us to the Father to be reconciled as heirs.
- Because Jesus did that for us, we are commanded to forgive.
- Forgiveness isn't fun. What would be fun is "playing God" when someone has wronged us. God knew we'd want to "play His role" and seek revenge so he said, *"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*ⁱⁱⁱ
- Forgiveness isn't fair. That's what the older brother said about the prodigal son when his father restored him. Where would we be if we got what was fair – what we deserve – instead of God's mercy and grace?
- Forgiveness seems foolish. Peter asked Jesus, *"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"*²² Jesus said...*"not...seven times, but seventy-seven times."*^{iv}

- What else did Jesus teach about forgiveness? He modeled it on the cross praying: *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*^v
- Jesus said to pray, *“...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,”* then said, *“If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.”* (Matthew 6:14–15 (NLT))
- We forgive because we’ve been forgiven. We CAN only forgive that way because the Spirit of God is living in us if we have trusted Christ.
- Any other thoughts on this challenging command to forgive others?
- Time didn’t allow us to unpack some very real issues with forgiveness: Is forgiveness letting them off the hook with no consequences? Does it mean allowing the person to continue to abuse me? Does it always mean reconciliation? By the way, “forgive and forget” isn’t in the Bible! If you want to learn about the practical issues of forgiveness here are some articles to help.
 - <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/forgiveness-and-restoration/>
 - <https://www.gotquestions.org/forgive-forget.html>
 - <https://www.familylifecanada.com/blog/forgiveness-is-not-a-feeling/>

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Professor Lewis B. Smedes wrote, *“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.”*^{vi}
- Thomas Watson wrote, *“We need not climb up into heaven to see whether our sins are forgiven. Let us look into our hearts and see if we can forgive others. If we can, we need not doubt that God has forgiven us.”*^{vii}
- Forgiveness seems unfair, risky, and foolish. But Jesus says if we follow Him, forgiveness is required. It may feel like the last thing we want to do but He says it must be the FIRST thing His followers are willing to do.

- This week when we feel like seeking revenge or harboring a grudge let's practice what Paul prescribed in **Ephesians 4:32 (NLT) — 32** Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

ⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Phm 7). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.salvationarmy.org/biblechallenge/news/151015>

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Ro 12:19). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

^{iv} *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Mt 18:21–22). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

^v *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Lk 23:34). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

^{vi} <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/lewis-b-smedes-quotes>

^{vii} <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/10013-phiaimon-1-3-a-lesson-on-forgiveness>