



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

I'm Sorry. . . So Sorry:

The DNA of Biblical Forgiveness

Philemon | Part 1 | Tim Badal | May 17, 2015
Philemon 1-7



We're going to take God's Word and turn to the book of Philemon. We are beginning a series on forgiveness and reconciliation. This series comes from one of the shortest books of the Bible: the book of Philemon. It is only 25 verses long. You could read this passage of Scripture before I finish this introduction. Yet, for what it lacks in words, it packs a powerful punch. It discusses something that all of us could use some leadership and guidance on: the idea of forgiveness and reconciliation in our relationships with one another and our relationships with God.

Some scholars believe that this little letter toward the end of the New Testament Scriptures was used to persuade society and culture as a whole to abandon the practice of slavery. As important as that may be, the most important thing accomplished in this book is the reconciliation of relationships. All of the hurts that this book discusses are placed under the cross of Jesus Christ and must be forgiven just as Christ has forgiven each and every one of us.

The Apostle Paul, just like our last series on Colossians, wrote this book. The connections between Philemon and Colossians were more than just authorship. The letter was written to a man by the name of Philemon, who lived in Colossae where the Colossian church was located. They didn't have buildings like we do today, so the church gathered in Philemon's house. He was, as the host of the home church of Colossae, no doubt a leader in that church. Paul had some words of guidance and exhortation for this friend, Philemon. Paul wanted Philemon to know what it means to pursue forgiveness and reconciliation in all of our relationships.

I'm going to give you a bird's eye view of what we're going to look at over the next three weeks as we invest our time on the subject of forgiveness and reconciliation. Before I read the first seven verses of this passage, I want to give you the gist of the letter. Paul is writing to a co-worker and friend named Philemon, a man of means who had household slaves. Before you get too worked up about that and begin to think very bad thoughts of him as a Christian, let's remember what Pastor Steve told us last week in his message on Colossians 4.

Slavery in the Roman Empire then was very different than Western slavery. Slavery in the Roman Empire was something that many people wanted to be part of because it provided a place of protection and allowed for identity. It allowed for a place of belonging. Philemon was a Christian who had slaves within his house. Indentured servitude was something that was part of first century Christianity. But Paul is going to reorder the subject of slavery.

This letter is all about a slave named Onesimus who was owned by Philemon. We don't know how many slaves Philemon may have had, but we know Onesimus was there. At some point during his time working under Philemon, Onesimus stole from Philemon. We don't know if it was goods or money, but it was something of great value. He ran away to Rome, a city with a population of nearly one million inhabitants. Rome was a place where fugitives went to disappear.

And whom did he come into contact with? The Apostle Paul. We're not sure where they met or how they met, but he encountered the gospel of Jesus Christ under the teaching of the Apostle Paul. They began a relationship with one another. At some point Paul said, "Hey, wait a minute, you're from Colossae? You're from Philemon's household? I know Philemon. I know the church at Colossae. I know the church that meets in your house. I know who you're running away from." So Paul wrote a letter to Philemon, reporting that he knew where Onesimus ended up. Paul then encouraged Onesimus to return to Philemon's home, not to become a slave again but an equal and a brother in Christ—as the Scriptures will tell us later in this letter. Philemon's job was to forgive the debt that was owed and to allow Onesimus to come back and receive brotherly Christian love, not retaliation.

What an incredible letter. It reminds us that you can't run away from God. If you think you can disappear, you've got another think coming. Jonah reminds us of that. It also shows us that the gospel isn't something we just read about, but something we put into action, even if it means we have to do hard things. As we look at this letter and the subject of forgiveness, we come to a text that tells the entire story. Philemon 1-7:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

I want to mention a few things:

1. Paul is the writer. We know that.
2. Timothy, Paul's spiritual son and disciple, is in Rome with Paul who is in prison. We know that because this is the same introduction as in the book of Colossians.
3. It's written to Philemon and a beloved fellow worker. He is a good man doing good things.
4. Apphia might be Philemon's wife. Paul is showing appreciation, not only to Philemon, but also to his wife.
5. Archippus: many scholars think he is Philemon and Apphia's son. And so Paul is greeting the family.
6. He starts in verse three with the standard introduction: "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

As we look at this book, we need to recognize that forgiveness and reconciliation is one of the hardest things to do. We love it when people ask for our forgiveness and we love for forgiveness to be shown to us. Yet, we have a difficult time asking for and seeking reconciliation with that forgiveness. It's also difficult to demonstrate forgiveness to those around us. One of the major contributors to the destruction of our relationships is unforgiveness. Instead of living lives of tranquility, we thrive on retaliation. As a result, people are filled with rage and bitterness, unwilling to let go of wrongs done years ago. This makes saying "I'm sorry" taboo.

Over the next three weeks we're going to explore what it means to forgive and how it should look. So today, I want to look at forgiveness and reconciliation as a whole. At the end of this message, we will come back and deal with verses four through seven. Finally, we'll apply Philemon's message. But first, we need to understand what the biblical DNA of forgiveness looks like.

1. The dilemma that we all face

Why in the world would we, a church in Middle America in the year 2015, devote so much time and energy to a letter that was written to a guy we've never met and to a place we've never visited? Why would we devote so much time to this ancient letter? The reason is that it's about forgiveness and reconciliation, something with which each one of us struggles. Why is this issue of forgiveness and reconciliation so vitally important for us to understand?

The dilemma is seen in two ways:

We are hurt often by others

It doesn't matter what gender you are. It doesn't matter how much you have in your bank account. It doesn't matter how old you are. It doesn't matter what kind of personality you have. I guarantee that sometime this week you will be hurt by someone else. You will be offended. It may come from your spouse or a family member. It may come from a co-worker or a neighbor. It may come from someone you've never met before. I can guarantee you that sometime this week, you will be offended.

Here's why: the Bible tells us that this world is full of sinners. And what do sinners do? Sinners are selfish. Sinners backstab. Sinners are evil people. You're a bunch of sinners and I'm a sinner. Because we have to live in this world as a group of sinners, we will inevitably hurt one another in ways we are ignorant of. Today someone will leave this church hurt or offended because they came with a group of sinners. This is something we have to deal with individually. This isn't something about which we can say, "This is important for the teenagers," or, "This is important for the old people," or, "The men need to hear this," or, "The women need it." This is something we all need to hear because we all are hurt. I can assure you that a child is going to walk away today offended or hurt because someone has wronged him or her. And we as a church must understand how God has enabled us to give Him glory and honor by showing forgiveness and pursuing reconciliation, even when we are wronged deeply.

We tend to harbor these hurts

The poet Alexander Pope reminds us that to err is human but to forgive is divine. Forgiveness and reconciliation is not our default. It isn't where we will inevitably go if we are left to ourselves. When someone wrongs us or hurts us, our normal human default is: "What am I going to do to get back at them? What am I going to do to retaliate? How can I hurt them just as they have hurt me?" We do it passively. We do it aggressively. Human beings by nature are seeking to figure out a way to add another wrong to the wrong that's been done to us, to add another sin to the sin that has been committed against us.

I'm not talking simply about those little "Oopsies" that people do because they're human. Just because someone does something that offends you doesn't mean they meant it. You may say, "Well, that's easy to forget." But I'm talking about forgiving someone who doesn't deserve it, someone who continues to offend or hurt you in an on-going way. Others hurt us and we harbor these hurts; we push them deep down inside. Some of you this morning are dealing with hurts that are so deep down inside right now because it has been years since that hurt took place. There are huge hurts. Please do not think that when I talk about the need for forgiveness and reconciliation that I would diminish in any way the size or scope of the wrongs that have been done.

What I'm talking about is a tall order. To forgive someone who doesn't deserve it, who continues to offend or hurt you, is something that, as Alexander Pope said, is divine. We want to tap into this kind of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In my first year of ministry, I went through a great time of depression which was precipitated by a hurt that was done to me 20 years earlier. I thought I had put it away. I thought it had been taken care of, but it kept coming up. Unforgiveness and bitterness against that person and against God were big in my life. Some of you are continuing to push down that hurt that's been done against you. Maybe it was done as a child or as a teenager. Maybe it was early on in your marriage. You've pushed it down.

That is not how God has called us to deal with hurts. We're not called to harbor them. The world tells us to do that. In a book written in 1989 called *Toxic Parents*, the author tells individuals that it is not good to forgive. In fact, one of the chapters is titled, "You don't have to forgive." It's okay for you to harbor ill feelings, anger and resentment. And while some of you may say, "Well, that's the road of least resistance," God says there's a better way to deal with hurts and pains.

In his commentary on the book of Philemon, John MacArthur says, "No matter what the issue is, what the offense may be, a failure to forgive by a Christian is a blatant and open act of disobedience, not only toward that individual but also toward God." Yet with the admonition before us, many of us choose the world's way to get a pound of flesh. "I will sue them to show them how wrong they were." We live in an "I will repay evil with evil" type of culture. It will only produce in the life of Christian things that bring disruption.

2. The disruption that unforgiveness brings to our lives

When we harbor hurts, unforgiveness brings disruption into our lives. What happens when we just push those hurts and feelings down? I want you to think about things that have hurt you in the past that maybe you haven't given to the Lord yet.

How are those issues affecting your walk with God and your walk with others? There are four results that I want you to see today.

Unforgiveness chains you and others to the past

Just picture this for a second. Think about a hurt that you have—maybe it happened today, maybe just a couple days ago. If you do not forgive and pursue reconciliation, you push the pause button in your relationship with that individual and your own relationship with life. You think, “I can't get beyond this moment, this place in this time in my life and its history.” But when you see that person, you're filled with rage because you continually go back to the moment when they offended you. You go back to the place where they said that harsh thing about you, that place where they betrayed you. You can never move on from that moment. I don't want you to just think you have confined that person to that place, but you have also confined yourself to that place. You have chained yourself to that moment in time. I want you to see the idiocy of that type of response to hurts and pains in your life.

All of us have failures in our lives. I think back to Michael Jordan, who missed the first three baskets of his NBA career. If we were to stop and hit pause on Michael Jordan's career at that moment, we would miss a lot of great basketball. Willie Mays struck out in his first at-bat appearance, yet went on to be a Hall of Fame baseball player, one of the best who ever played. If we stopped and said, “That failure is going to define him; we're going to hit the pause button on that,” we would never have experienced the greatness of Willie Mays.

Think about the political realm. Abraham Lincoln was a failure as a politician in his early years. If we chained him to that point of failure, we would have never experienced the greatness of his presidency in keeping the Union together during the Civil War. But what do we do over and over again when people wrong us? When people hurt us? When we hold things against others? We hit the pause button that doesn't allow them to rise above that very moment.

Let me get a little closer to home. I'm a pastor of the church I grew up in. I was not the perfect choir boy or Sunday school kid. Had they hit the pause button in that moment and said, “Tim will never be anything better than that; we're going to consign him to his past,” I would not be here this morning preaching to you. Yet what we do over and over again is hit the pause button. One of the things we desire as human beings is a second chance. How many of you want to see a second chance when you fail? We all do. But the thing that we are least willing to give to others is a second chance. So we chain others and ourselves to the past.

Unforgiveness causes bitterness to invade your life

Bitterness isn't just a sin. It's a cancer that eats away at your entire soul. This cancer of bitterness must be fought against with all your might because it gives you a nasty disposition. It causes you to be sarcastic and biting with your words. It causes you to be malignant toward others because it can do only one thing. Bitterness produces only one thing in your life: destruction of all your relationships.

We're told in the Scriptures over and over again, “Don't be bitter.” Bitterness is known in the Bible as a spiritual poison that defiles many. It's the source of countless spiritual and physical problems in the lives of people today. Bitterness can be tricky because we don't always recognize it. It's not always visible like anger. We can easily point out anger, but bitterness can reside in our souls. That poison can stay deep within us. Bitterness is an underlying problem that doesn't always manifest itself, but it dwells within and spreads to the entire person. That's why the writer of Hebrews says, “*See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled*” (Hebrews 12:15).

Some of you right now are not experiencing real relationships with people or a real relationship with God because you've got a poison deep inside that you are unwilling to give up. It's the poison of bitterness. Someone has wronged you and you can't let it go. God says, “As my child, as one whom I love and care for deeply, bitterness is not the way that the Christian is called to live out his or her life.” Bitterness is something we've got to be careful to control.

Unforgiveness creates an open door for the devil

When we choose unforgiveness, we throw out the welcome mat for the devil to do his work. We till up the ground so the devil can plant seeds of hatred in our lives. Paul saw how unforgiveness opened the way for the devil in the church at Ephesus when he reminds us in chapter four to not let the sun go down on our anger. So that there's no confusion, it is totally understandable and even right at times for us to be angry. We reserve that right. But we're called in our anger not to sin (Ephesians 4:26), not to grow bitter, not to use that anger against others in a sinful way.

Let us remember that one of the first sins of humanity was the uncontrolled bitterness and anger of a brother named Cain, who was so filled with anger that he got a warning from God Himself: "Be careful. Sin is crouching at your door and it will overtake you if you don't master it" (Genesis 4:7). And some of you right now are saying, "You know what? My bitterness and anger about that thing that was done to me, I've got it under control. It's all okay. I know you're saying it's a poison, but I've learned to deal with it."

Let me tell you something. The devil is licking his chops waiting for the right moment when you are filled with anger and such unrighteous discontentment that you will spring into action. Cain never would have killed his brother if he was not angry. But when he was angry, he saw fit to kill him and come up with reasons that he could do so. So Paul reminds us that when we're angry, when someone hurts us, we need to seek forgiveness and reconciliation as soon as possible.

Some of us, when we are hurt, keep a record of wrong. The Bible says love keeps no record of wrong (1 Corinthians 13:6). Yet every time your spouse or another individual in the church or in the neighborhood keeps doing that thing that angers you, you keep adding tally marks. As you add those tally marks and keep those records of wrong, you never resolve it. You grow more and more bitter. At some point the devil is going to put you in a situation where his temptation is going to be too much to bear, and you're going to be moved to action and it will involve sin.

So we need to address it Biblically; we need to address it quickly. When someone wrongs you, as soon as possible go and make it right with that individual so that you won't be filled with anger.

Unforgiveness culminates in a strained relationship with God

So you say, "You know what, Tim? I really don't care if I ever get right with those people. I can't stand their guts. I hate them. I'm okay because I come into Village Bible Church and I know they're there. I know where they sit so I just won't sit next to them. I know what small group they're in so I won't go to their small group. I know what ministries they are involved in and so I will just stay away from them. I'll do fine as long as I don't have to see them. I'll pray that the church continues to grow because as long as the church keeps growing then there's a greater and greater chance that I never have to talk to them again. I'm all good."

Here's the problem with unforgiveness. When we choose to withhold forgiveness from someone, God says it has a direct involvement in our relationship with Him. Matthew 6:15 should strike fear in every one of us who holds something against another because of the massive implications it has. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we are called to forgive one another for their trespasses. This is what Jesus says: "*But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*" Now, I don't know what that looks like. That's one of those verses that I just let resonate in my heart. I don't know all the implications of what that means. But here's what I do know: I don't want my trespasses not being forgiven by God the Father. When I choose not to forgive you, my brother and sister, and I harbor bitterness and anger toward you because of the wrongs you do, God says, "I will harbor those sins, those grievances, that he has against you."

As a believer you don't want that. You don't want God holding on to your sins. I don't know how we balance the fact that "God remembers our sins no more" with this verse, but here's what I do know: we have to hold these things in context. God says that unforgiveness has a direct correlation to our relationship with God. It strains our ability to experience His blessing in our ministry. It fills us with guilt. It makes us doubt our assurance of salvation. Instead of being right with God and others, we continue to hinder the blessings and grace of God because we choose to hold things against one another.

Why in the world would we do that? Why would we harbor and hold ill feelings against others who have hurt us? Let me give you five dark benefits of unforgiveness. I got this from Paul Tripp who says there are five reasons why we as Christians choose unforgiveness over forgiveness. They are dark, sinful benefits.

1. **Power.** There is power in having something to hold over another person's head. There is power in using a person's weakness and failure against him or her. In moments when we want our own way, all we need to do is pull out some wrong against us as our relational trump card. Feels good, doesn't it?
2. **Identity.** Holding on to another's sins, weaknesses and failures makes us feel superior to them. It allows us to believe that we are more righteous and more spiritually mature than they are and we want them to know that.
3. **Entitlement.** Because of another person's wrongs against us, he or she now owes us. Carrying these wrongs makes us feel deserving and therefore comfortable with being self-focused and demanding. "After all," we might say, "I had to endure in a relationship with you and all the wrongs that you've done toward me, so don't I deserve it?"

4. Weaponry. The sins and failures of another that have been done against us become like a loaded gun that we carry around. It's very tempting to pull them out and use them when we are angry. When someone has hurt us in some way, it is very tempting to hurt him or her back by throwing in their face just how evil and immature they are because of the things they've done.
5. It puts us in God's position. This is the one place we must never be, but it's also the position into which all of us want to put ourselves. We want to be the judges of others, yet we are not the One Who dispenses the consequences for another's sins. It's not our job to make sure they feel the appropriate amount of guilt for what they've done. But it's very tempting, even for Christians, to ascend to God's throne and make ourselves the judge.

Why do we choose unforgiveness over forgiveness? Because it's easy. Because it makes us feel better. Do you see the absolute foolishness it is for a Christian not to forgive? It has a negative impact on you. It hinders God's grace and blessing in your own life and it makes you a self-righteous jerk who thinks you've done no wrong. Is that how you want to be defined? Is that what you want to be known for?

We live in a world full of sinners who are constantly hurting one another and what we need to do as Christians is be a bright and shining light and not respond as the world does. We will forgive. So where do we go?

3. The definitive authority on forgiveness

We turn to the Scriptures to set our definitions. So we turn to that authority. The Bible uses 75 word pictures to help us grasp the importance of forgiveness in our lives and our relationship with God. It does this in a couple ways. Within the Scriptures we see how:

Forgiveness is defined

It is in the Scriptures alone that we understand how forgiveness is defined. The Bible shows us many different facets of what it means to forgive. Let me share some of the ways the Bible talks about it:

- To forgive is to open the jail cell and let the prisoner free.
- To forgive is to write on someone's I.O.U. "Paid in full."
- To forgive is to pound the gavel and announce to the courtroom that the person who has wronged you is no longer guilty.
- To forgive is like shooting an arrow so far that it can never be found again.
- To forgive is to clean up and bundle up all the garbage in one's house so that when people enter it they can declare it immaculate.
- To forgive is to take up an anchor on a ship so that it may sail the open seas.
- To forgive is to lessen the grip you have on your wrestling opponent so that they might find victory.
- To forgive is to literally sand blast graffiti off a wall, leaving it totally clean.

Who in your life today needs to see some of these word pictures from you? What hurt, what pain has been done to you that needs to be forgiven?

God demonstrates it for us

The Bible doesn't just define forgiveness for us; it chronicles how God demonstrates forgiveness. The gospel is a picture of how God demonstrates this forgiveness for us. Romans 5:8 reminds us what forgiveness looks like. It's merciful. God demonstrates His love for us in that while you and I were still sinners, while we were shaking our fists at God, while we were making obscene gestures at God in our humanity, God demonstrates forgiveness to us through His love by sending His Son Jesus to die on our behalf. *"While we were still sinners Christ died for us."* That's how Jesus forgives.

Forgiveness is given to the offender who does not deserve it. Forgiveness is given with compassion and grace. That same forgiveness is given each and every time you and I trample the cross of Jesus Christ when we choose sin over holiness. *"[God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9). So you say, "Tim, I can forgive when

someone does something to me once. What happens when they do it again and again and again?" You forgive just as Christ has forgiven you.

The parables display two options

In the parables, Jesus tells stories about forgiveness. Two parables in particular display for us what forgiveness looks like. In Luke 15, we have the story of the Prodigal Son who asks for his inheritance from his father who has not died yet. He says, "Father, I wish you were dead. But since you're not dead, just give me the money that's owed to me when you die and I'm going to go live my life." He goes and lives a wild and disobedient life. He finds himself on heartbreak row, eating food with the pigs, and he comes to a realization after his season of debauchery that, "Life isn't going the way I wanted it to and I'm in trouble. I'll go back and become a slave to my father. He will take me in as a slave, but I can never be his son again. I can never have the position I once did, but I'm going to go back because life is that bad."

Luke 15 tells us that when the son was still far off on his way back home, the father sees the son and is overflowing with compassion and love and mercy. He runs to the son, meets him and forgives him in that moment. He doesn't say, "Yes, you can be a slave." He says, "You are my son. Bring up the fattened calf. Let's kill it. Let's throw a party. Let's put a ring on your finger. Let's restore you to exactly where you were before you left." That is what forgiveness looks like. The Bible says that there's a celebration that happens when we forgive one another.

But then there's another parable found in Matthew 18:23-35 about the unforgiving servant. The story goes like this: A servant owes a massive debt to his master, a debt so large that the servant couldn't repay it in ten lifetimes. So he pleads to his master, "Please, please, please. Master, forgive me of the debt. Give me time to pay it off. Don't throw me in prison. Don't hold me accountable for my wrongs against you." The master, filled with compassion and love, forgives the entire debt and sets him free.

That servant then goes and does the unthinkable. He finds another servant who owes a miniscule debt to him. And the same response comes from that servant. "Please, please, please. Give me time. I'll pay it off. Please, please, please. There are reasons I carry this debt and I'll do whatever I have to in order to pay it off." The other servant says, "No." He puts his arms around the guy's neck and says, "Pay it now or I'm going to throw you into jail." All the other servants are watching saying, "Wait a minute. The one who was forgiven a great debt now is unwilling to forgive a little debt?" Word makes it back to the master and the master brings that servant back and he says, "I can't believe you've done what you've just done. You've been forgiven a great debt and now you hold the small debt against another?" What does Jesus say? "Take that worthless servant and throw him into jail until he can pay off the debt."

Forgiveness brings celebration. Unforgiveness brings imprisonment and pain.

Forgiveness must be the Christ-follower's default response

The Bible makes it clear over and over again that forgiveness for the follower of Jesus Christ must be the default response when we are hurt. Peter asks Jesus a question in Matthew 18: "How many times should I forgive someone the wrongs that they do?" And Peter, thinking that he's really spiritual, instead of saying once or twice, says, "Seven times?" He thinks he's got it covered. But Jesus says, "Seven times? No, brother, seventy times seven." That number means we are to always be at a place of forgiveness. It is a command for us to follow. The Scriptures remind us of this truth.

Let's return to the book of Philemon. Why is Philemon such an important book? It's important because of these truths. In one letter we see forgiveness in action. So how do we get there?

4. The description of one who forgives

What does it look like? What are our action steps to forgive? Philemon's life and ministry show us what forgiveness looks like. Philemon 4-7:

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

There are three things I want you to think about as you struggle with this calling and mandate to forgive:

Remember a sinner's need to be forgiven

The apostle Paul begins this letter by saying in verse one, "I am a prisoner for Christ Jesus." He doesn't say, "I'm a prisoner of the Romans. Boo hoo. Things are not going well with me." He says, "I'm here for a reason. I'm here for a purpose. I'm here to proclaim the gospel to people I would never be able to proclaim the gospel to elsewhere." Paul always remembers that he's a prisoner. I wonder if he recognized in that moment, "What opportunity did I have to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ when I, in the early part of my life, was a Christian killer?" Paul reminds us that each of us should be in prison for the wrongs we've done toward God, that we should be condemned, that we should have a big "F" on our foreheads reminding us that we are fugitives of the law. But we've been forgiven.

Paul reminds Philemon, "Hey Philemon, I am a prisoner who's been forgiven. So are you." The reason that unforgiveness is so stinking ugly for believers is that it makes us throw away everything we base our faith on and harbor bitterness. What we believe has saved us, we withhold from others.

You are a sinner in need of forgiveness. When others wrong you, remember that you have wronged others. There are hurtful things that you've done that you need to be forgiven. Those who hurt you also need forgiveness.

Have a strong relationship with God

In Philemon 4-6, Paul tells us that Philemon has a strong faith, one that is actively and consistently seeking to honor God in all ways. Just because you're great at ministry, just because you are considered a spiritual person, doesn't give you the right to harbor bitterness and anger toward others. Paul reminds us that we cannot compartmentalize our lives and say, "Well, I'm doing a lot of great things for God over here, so I can have my pet grievances over here. I can withhold forgiveness because they've wronged me. I'm trying to do ministry and I'm trying to do the right thing, but they've wronged me." When that happens, you hold onto the self-righteous idea that you can withhold from them the love and forgiveness that you have been shown as a sinner.

Philemon has what you and I have. If we call ourselves believers, then we have the Holy Spirit living inside us and unforgiveness is incompatible with the fruit of that Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). What part of unforgiveness involves itself with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? You want to hold on to your own forgiveness? Then you've got to start asking the question, "Am I filled with the Spirit or am I filled with myself?" The fruit of the Spirit doesn't lend itself to unforgiveness in any way. So if unforgiveness is something present in your life, there's a good chance that the fruit of the Spirit is not in blossom and you need to start weeding that garden, allowing that fruit to grow when hurts come your way.

Seek to refresh others

Philemon was a person who sought to refresh others. Paul says to him, "You have been refreshing to me. The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you." As people walked around and were part of your life last week, could they say, "This person was a refreshment to me, a cup of cold water on a hot, dry day"? One way that you can refresh the souls of those around you is to forgive them and tell them that. When someone wrongs you look deep into their eyes and say, "I forgive you. I love you."

I have wronged many others. One way I wish others would love on me is to do what I'm doing right now. I'm telling you, "Yes, you wronged me; yes, you hurt me, but I forgive you. I'm not going to hold it against you anymore. I'm not going to confine you to that moment in the past. I forgive you."

Some of your marriages are hindered because you will not forgive one another. Take some time, look at one another and say, "I forgive you." That doesn't mean there isn't reconciliation that needs to take place and there aren't issues that need to be resolved. But it begins with forgiveness. Maybe your child (or a parent) has done something against you and you're harboring that. Look at him or her and say, "I forgive you. I'm not going to hold that against you because I don't want God to hold these things against me." Maybe it's a boss or a co-worker.

As we begin to embark on this journey through Philemon, let us default to refreshing others by forgiving them the wrongs they have done. Poet Pope was right when he said, "To err is human but to forgive is divine." Let's pursue that divinity through the power of the Holy Spirit.