



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Showcase Showdown

Philemon | Part 2 | Tim Badal | May 24, 2015
Philemon 8–16



We're in the middle of a three-week study looking at the shortest of Paul's letters written while he was in prison. He writes this letter not to a church, not to a group of people, but to one individual: a man by the name of Philemon. On the heels of our study of Colossians, the teaching team thought it would be a good idea to spend some time looking at this letter because of the close connections that Philemon has with the letter written to the Colossian church.

For those who weren't with us last week, we learned Philemon is a citizen of the city of Colossae. He is a convert through the teachings of the Apostle Paul. We learned that Philemon is a mature and growing follower of Jesus Christ who has a huge heart for hospitality. This is seen in the fact that Philemon opens his home to the Colossian church to have their worship times and gatherings for opportunities for prayer and fellowship. Philemon has the heart of hospitality to say, "Hey, let's gather as Christians here in the city of Colossae. Let's gather in my home and I'm going to make sure my home is ready and open so the people of God can come together to worship and fellowship."

We've learned that Philemon has heard the message of Colossians and is aware of the need for his salvation to be lived out in many different ways. One way I think Philemon would have opened his ears a little more would have been when Paul addressed the issue of slaves and masters because Philemon is a master. He has slaves and household servants under his leadership and guidance. We've talked about the issue of slavery and how it differs from our American understanding of slavery, yet we need to recognize that Paul addresses this issue of slaves and masters, encouraging Christian masters to take care of and minister to the slaves in their homes.

We don't know how many slaves Philemon has but we know of one slave because he's named in this letter. His name is Onesimus. We know very little about Onesimus. Outside of the book of Philemon we know nothing about him, but we don't need much more than what we have here. We know he's a slave; we know Philemon is his master; and at some point during their time as slave and master, Onesimus makes a decision that he's going to steal from Philemon and make a run for it. We know Onesimus is going to steal some tangible goods or money, then run to a city where he can hide—the city of Rome with some 800,000 residents. That's where fugitives went to hide. Onesimus thinks, "I've made it! I've got the goods. I'm no longer a slave under Philemon. I can do my own thing."

Through his time in Rome he comes into contact with all kinds of different people and, wouldn't you know it, one of the people he runs into is the Apostle Paul. Through the teaching of Paul and the leading of the Holy Spirit, Onesimus bows the knee to Jesus Christ. Then there were probably some conversations where Paul would say, "Hey, Onesimus, where are you from?"

"I'm from Colossae but I don't want to talk about it. You see, I stole from my master who had a church meeting in his home, Paul."

Paul says, "I know that church. Who's your master?"

"Philemon."

"I know Philemon. Philemon, just like you, is a convert to Jesus Christ through my teaching. Onesimus, what are you doing here?"

"I stole from my master, Philemon. I can't go back. Even though I'm a follower of Jesus Christ now, even though I want to make right on the wrongs that I've done, there's no way I can go back to Colossae. There's no way I can make it right with my master."

So Paul writes this letter, giving a reference and a word of encouragement to Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not as a runaway slave but, as we talked about last week, as a brother in Christ.

So what we see in this little letter is an action-packed story of grace and love that focuses on forgiveness and how forgiveness leads to reconciliation and how we as a people 2,000 years later need that same grace in our lives. We also need to learn to forgive those who have hurt us and bring about reconciliation in our lives and our relationships with others.

If you weren't here last week I would say pick up a sermon CD, go to our website where you can read the transcript as well. Last week we talked about the mandate for forgiveness; why we as Christians are called to forgive. Today we're going to look at the method of extending forgiveness, the how-to—how we extend forgiveness whether people deserve it or not. Then we'll talk next week about the motivation of why we do such things.

So let's look with our Bibles open and our hearts receptive to Philemon 1:8-16. We're going to start in verse four and we're going to learn how we go about the biblical method of choosing forgiveness and reconciliation.

⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

As a child I loved to watch gameshows. One of my favorites was the Price Is Right. I don't know if it was the rowdy crowd full of commotion or the antics of Bob Barker, the announcer, who would say, "Come on down as the next contestant on The Price Is Right!" Maybe it was the big money wheel. I do know this for sure: as a boy with ADD it sure was a great way to spend a day off from school.

One of the best parts of the show that I really enjoyed was The Showcase Showdown at the end of each show. This was where the two finalists of that day's show were given a chance to pick some great prizes that they could win if they got the price right. As a kid I would dream as the curtain would pass the new car, the new wonderful once-in-a-lifetime vacation, the beautiful cookware—you name it, I loved every bit of it. I would begin to think what it might be like to be that contestant.

But it wasn't the prize that won my heart. It wasn't all those great prizes. It was the excitement of the decision the contestant had to make between two options. I want to ask you to enter into that for a moment. You've been asked to be on a gameshow but it is not The Price is Right. The gameshow is called Forgiveness is Right. You're there in the crowd and your name is called. "Hey, Tim Badal, you're our next contestant on Forgiveness is Right. Come on down!" You clap. I clap. We're all excited. This is great!

Bob Barker, or Drew Carey, or whoever now runs the show says to you, "Hey man, you've made it! Your dreams are about to come true. Let's learn a little bit about you. Tim Badal, tell me about yourself."

"Well, I've got to tell you, Mr. X has really offended me. He has really wronged me. He has hurt me. He has cut me deep. He has taken that which he should've never taken. He has done something to me that can never be forgiven, that can never be justified. I'm here to tell you I'm a broken individual because of that moment in time, because of that issue that Mr. X has done to me."

Then the voice over the loud speaker says, "Well, Bob, what do we have for him?" The curtain opens and it's the first option in your showcase studio and is entitled Retaliation.

"In this Showcase Studio, Tim, you get to hold grudges. You get to malign the character of the offender. You get to speak ill of him. You get to seek revenge. You get to make his life miserable. You get to make sure he never, ever does that again to you or anyone else. In this Showcase Studio, you get to judge him as unlovable, unusable, useless and worthy of the worst of punishments. This prize package brings great joy to your self-righteousness and unloving heart and it can be yours if you choose unforgiveness."

What fun! What revenge! What justice! It's going to feel so right, the sense of righting the wrongs. Bob, you don't have to show me the next Showcase Studio. That's what I want. This just feels right when someone has wronged me. I want retaliation. Revenge."

But then the announcer says, "But wait! There's a second Showcase Studio. This one falls under the heading of Reconciliation. In this Showcase you can choose to be loving instead of bitter. You can choose to see the offender through the lens that he is a sinner but so are you. You can choose to acknowledge that the wrong he has done is huge but so are the offenses that you've done to God, as well as others. In this Showcase you can show compassion and mercy. You can allow grace to flow in such a way that you speak words of love and kindness so that you're even willing to pray for the one who has wronged you. You see in this Showcase, you forfeit your chance for revenge, for self-righteous judgment, and you choose to do the harder, godlier thing. You choose to forgive."

In that moment, what are you going to choose—revenge and retaliation or forgiveness and reconciliation?

In our text here, Paul is pleading for his friend Philemon, a mature follower of God, to make a wise decision. Paul is telling Philemon, and us today, that we need to choose forgiveness. We need to make that choice no matter how difficult that choice may be. Now I know many of us today would right away say from our cushy pews at Village Bible Church, "I choose forgiveness." But let me remind you the sting of those things that are offensive to us; the things that hit us out of nowhere; the things we never saw coming our way that have caused us great pain and suffering from the hands of another. You see, we more often than not are not choosing forgiveness and reconciliation but by default we choose revenge and retaliation. Oh, we do it passively; we do it aggressively; but in the end whether we're passive about it or aggressive about it, we get our pound of flesh.

Paul says for the Christian, it is option number two always—no matter how difficult or hard the road may be. It may cause you as a Christian to look foolish and naïve; it may mean that you have to minister to those who have hurt you. But Paul says it's the right thing to do; it's the biblical thing to do. Forgiveness shows the world and our Father in heaven that you and I truly understand the forgiveness God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

1. Forgiveness Begins When We Act Out of a Heart of Love

But how do we do it? Last week we learned the mandate. We get it. We've got to do it: forgive as Christ has forgiven us. We've got to do it. But how? In our text today there are three biblical steps to forgiveness.

First, I want you to notice that forgiveness begins when we act out of a heart of love. One of the first things that we learn in our text about Philemon is that he is a man who loves others. Notice verse five says, "*I hear about your love...*" He's a lover. Notice, who does he love? He loves the Lord and all the saints. Notice down in verse seven it says that Paul himself has derived much joy and comfort from Philemon's love.

No doubt Epaphras had spoken well of him. Remember Epaphras is the pastor of the Colossian church who, because of the Colossian controversies about Who Jesus was and how we were to worship Him and live out His preeminence that we learned about in our previous study, Epaphras goes to Paul in prison to seek wisdom. Paul begins to ask questions. "Hey, tell me about the church."

Epaphras says, "Let me tell you about Philemon. Man, Philemon has opened his home. Not only does he open his home and put out a nice sweets table after church for fellowship, but he loves people. I mean his house is their house. He and his wife love on people and care for people; they minister to people."

With this report, Paul is filled with joy and derives much comfort from this idea that one of the churches that he planted is doing Christianity the right way. Paul says, "Okay Philemon, I've heard this about you and I know the Spirit of the living God is alive and well in you. How do I know it? Because you love God and you love others."

Paul's words to Philemon remind us of a passage in 1 John 4:7–8. This could have been said of Philemon. "*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*" Paul says, "I know you're a believer. I know you're a follower of Jesus Christ because you love God and you love others."

Could that be said of you today? Could someone say, "You know what? I know you're a follower of Jesus Christ because of the way you love. You've got a big heart. You care about people. You long to minister to them; to be, as Paul said in verse seven, a refreshment to those around you."

Now many of us right away would say, "Well yes! I'm a lover. I love God's people. I love my neighbors. I love my family. I love the strangers around me." I am genuinely a nice guy." People would agree to that fact that you are a lover of God and people.

But how does that love work when someone has hurt and wronged you? Philemon has shown himself to be faithful in loving people but notice, God doesn't give curves to His grading system. No, the model of perfection is Jesus. Philemon has a problem because Philemon loves people who are easy to love, but Paul's going to say, "But what about Onesimus, that guy who has wronged you? That guy who has taken stuff from you? That guy who made you look stupid? That guy who caused you not to trust people anymore? The one who took your stuff and ran. Are you going to love him?"

You see, Jesus reminds us we are not to just love the easy ones. It wasn't hard for Jesus to love the children who came to Him. "Don't let the children be kept from Me. I just want to love on them" (Matthew 19:13-15). Jesus loved those who were easily lovable. But we notice that Jesus also loved the unlovable—the leper, the prostitute. He loved those who were defiled and broken, who were thrown away by cultural standards. Jesus loved them and filled with compassion He loved the unlovable.

Let's take it even farther. When they're nailing Jesus' hands and feet onto the cross, Jesus is uttering words of love when He says, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34). It's easy to love the lovable, but can you love those who, from an earthly standpoint, may seem impossible to love? Paul says, "I know you're doing a good job but doing a good job serving the easy, lovable people isn't the mark of Christianity, but loving and praying for your enemies is."

Forgiveness should be an attitude before it is an action

How do you get there? How do you get to a place where you love not only those who are easy to love but those who are difficult and have wronged you? I want you to notice that this forgiveness has to be our attitude before it can be an action. Paul says in Philemon 1:21, "*Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*" Paul says right away, "Philemon, I know you're going to do the right thing." How does Paul know that? Because Paul acknowledges that Philemon is cultivating a heart of love. Philemon sought to serve others and not himself; he sought to minister to the needs of those around him; he sought to love those in his midst. Was he perfect? Absolutely not.

For many of us it is easy to love those who return some level of love back to us. But let me encourage you as a Christian to start training yourself to love those who aren't as easy to love. I'm not even talking about those who offend you for a moment, but to begin by opening your heart to love people who may never return the favor. Little by little, as you show love to those who maybe are never going to love you back, you begin to expand your love into an ever growing heart for people around you. Then maybe when the time comes and as your heart of love grows, you might be able to forgive the most grievous wrongs done against you because your heart has expanded and your attitude about love can be put into action at a moment's notice.

But notice, until your attitude is love, your action will never be one of forgiveness. Perhaps you're thinking, "Well, I'll get it right when it happens. When someone wrongs me I'll be ready to forgive them on a moment's notice. I don't have to work at it. I don't have to prepare it. I'll just be ready." Let me tell you that's idiocy. It's like me saying, "Hey, let's go run the Chicago marathon." No. You can't just get up one morning and say, "I'm going to run the Chicago marathon." You've got to train. You've got to prepare. You've got to be ready, because if you're not, you're never going to be able to accomplish the goal that you've set for yourself. It's not going to happen. Neither will forgiveness unless you and I are growing a heart of love for others around us, including our enemies.

Forgiveness should be our desire, not simply our duty

Attitude needs to be before action, but notice there's a second thing about this: we need to recognize that this issue of forgiveness should be our desire, not simply our duty. Are we called, commanded, told to forgive? Yes. Over and over again it is commanded. Jesus doesn't suggest it. Paul doesn't say, "Hey, if you've got some time on your hands, go ahead and forgive." No. You need to forgive. It's a command. It's a calling. But notice what Paul says in verse eight, "*Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required...*" In other words, "You've got to forgive, Philemon. That's what Christians do." Paul says that's not the way to get to a heart of forgiveness. Why? "Philemon, you don't need to just forgive because the Bible tells you so. You don't need to just forgive because that's what good Christians do. You don't need to just forgive because a Christian's duty is to forgive. You need to forgive out of a heart of love."

Watch how this plays out for a moment. Someone has wronged you and you're full of anger, frustration and sadness over what he has done to you. So you say, "I forgive you." And someone says, "Why?" "Because I have to. I don't want to. I don't embrace it, but I've got to so I forgive."

Years ago when our children were smaller they would get into fights with each other. We would pull them apart because we thought that was good parenting and we would tell them, "Say you're sorry. Seek forgiveness. You punched your brother. You can't do that. Tell him you're sorry and say you forgive him." "Well, I'm sorry." "Well, I forgive you." Okay that works. That put us up for parent of the year. No!

While it is something we are commanded to do, forgiveness cannot be done through gritted teeth. It needs to be done out of a heart of absolute love. Don't have disclaimers as part of your forgiveness. I can't tell you how many times I've been counseling when an offender has sought forgiveness of someone who they've offended and the offended says, "Well, I guess I forgive you." What do you mean you guess? You can't guess forgiveness.

I'm sure glad Jesus didn't do that while hanging on the cross! "I guess I forgive them because I have to, because that's what the Savior of the universe does, He forgives." No! With a heart of compassion and mercy, hanging on that cross, He looked down on our helpless state and said, "Father, forgive them. I don't need to think about it. I don't need to guess about it. Forgive them because I love them." *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son..."* (John 3:16).

You can't clench your teeth and growl the words, "I forgive you." You can't say, "Well, that's what good Christians do." Some of us think we're putting a prize on our chest, a medal, by saying, "You know what? I forgive because that's what a good Christian does and because I'm a good Christian I forgive." Hogwash! Good Christians love and you're lacking that. So let's talk about how good your Christianity really is.

So what does Paul say? Yes, you're required to forgive. Yes, you're required to forgive and will be held accountable. But God doesn't want you to do it because of a command. Notice Paul says, *"I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you"* (Philemon 8–9a). Paul appeals on the sake of love. Listen, this is very important: it should be the desire of every Christian to forgive when the time warrants it. You and I should look forward to it. It shouldn't be something we have to be convinced about; it shouldn't be something we're coerced into doing. Forgiveness is not something for which we barter back and forth with the offender. It's not filled with caveats; it's not filled with disclaimers. It is the desire of the heart. That is how Jesus forgave us.

Jesus didn't forgive us and say, "Yeah, your sins are all taken care of as long as you stay away from that one. As long as you're at church on Sunday I'll forgive you. As long as you try really, really hard not to do that again I'll take care of your sin." No, He forgives and extends that forgiveness to us. That seems so counterintuitive as a culture. It seems so wrong. Why in the world would we extend forgiveness that way? Why would we do it out of desire? Why should I look forward to people offending me so that I can extend forgiveness? That's so messed up!

You know what? The Bible says a lot of messed up stuff. *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds"* (James 1:2). "Wait a minute. When bad things happen I should have a smiling face and be filled with joy? That doesn't seem right." The Bible is full of these paradoxes, right? When trials come we should be filled with joy. Why? Because God's going to use that trial. [A bit later we'll talk about how God will use bad times in our lives as well.]

Now notice Paul brings the gravity of the offense of Onesimus into the picture. Notice he says later on in verse 18 that whatever Onesimus owes Philemon, he can charge it to Paul's account. Paul does not say, "Onesimus is innocent." Paul says he's guilty of sin. "The dude stole from you, Philemon. I get it. But let's put it into perspective. Let's understand that what Onesimus did to you is not the end of the world." How does he do that? How does Paul begin to do that?

When people wrong us we make a mountain out of a mole hill. There are some massive things people have done in our lives that impact us greatly, but I want you—whether the offense is small or large—to ask the question, "Have I put it in the right perspective?"

Let me tell you that I strongly dislike LeBron James. I love him as a human being; I hope he's with us in glory. But athletically speaking, I can't stand his guts. Okay? One of the reasons that I can't stand LeBron James is every time someone breathes on the guy he falls back as if someone has amputated part of his body. It drives me crazy. How many would agree with that? I want to throw things around the house. I'm like, "Get a grip, dude! You're like 6'9", 270 pounds of pure muscle, you're a thoroughbred and you're whining about stuff like this."

Let me tell you something: if you watch basketball you fully recognize what I'm talking about. He's a flopper. Can I tell you that many of us flop when people offend us? Someone offends you and your reaction is, "Oh, my eye! Look what you did!" It only needs a band aid, but you're going to the ER about it. You know what the Bible says when people offend you? *"Love covers a*

multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Get over it. Where there are bigger offenses, put it in perspective and recognize that God didn't fall off His throne when it happened and that the world is going to continue to move on. Does it hurt? Yes. Does it mean that it might even involve counseling and restitution? Yes. Might it involve consequence for the offender? Yes. Might it involve separation? Yes. Might it involve breaking of the relationship? Yes. But we've got to put it in perspective.

Here's what Paul says in verses nine and ten: "...I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I appeal to you..." In other words, "Hey, Philemon, get a grip. I love you buddy. We're close. I care about you but let me remind you that I'm old." Paul is laying it out.

Josh Orin always says as a pastor I lay it on thick. When we need something done I go to Josh and I guilt trip him into doing it. He's always like, "Man, you're like peanut butter—you're laying it on thick, Pastor." That's what Paul is doing. Paul's laying it on thick. He's saying, "Hey Philemon, is this offense really that bad? Let me remind you that I'm old." We don't know how old Paul is here; probably in his sixties or more. That's pretty old in first century times. [That's young these days, amen? Sixty is like the new twenty. I get it. I'm there.] But when Paul says he's an old man he's not referencing, in essence, birthdays. What he's saying is, "My life has been hard. I've lived a difficult life." Let me just remind you of 2 Corinthians 11:23–28. Listen to what Paul's sixty years of time looked like:

²³ I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Paul says, "Okay Philemon, I get it. You've had a hard life. Someone took some stuff from you. I know it hurts. Now let's bring it into perspective. I've run for my life and now I'm old and in prison." I wonder if Paul shook the chains that he had on as he wrote this letter, saying, "Hey, Philemon, you're not in chains right now, buddy. I get that Onesimus has really wronged you. I get it that he hurt you, but let's bring it into perspective. Someone always has it worse. Someone always has a more difficult task before them. Does it make it any easier? No. I get it. It hurts. But we've got to put this thing into perspective. Be careful, especially in the small offenses—like someone taking something of value from you—that you don't lose your mind thinking it's the end of the world."

Paul says, "Hey, I've been able to forgive those who have wronged me." I wonder if Paul's thoughts went back to when he was holding the jackets of the religious Jewish zealots of the day who were stoning Stephen (Acts 7). "Philemon, you can't forgive Onesimus? My goodness, Stephen, the great martyr of the faith, forgave those who were raining down rocks on his head. He was able to forgive them but you can't forgive what so-and-so said about you? How so-and-so let you down? How so-and-so hurt you? You can't release that?"

I am blown away by the reports of our brethren in the faith who are uttering the words "I forgive you" in Arabic when people are cutting off their heads, yet we struggle because someone looked at us funny at church and we say we can't forgive. It's too hard. Too difficult. Get a grip. Right? Let's put it in perspective. It's not as bad as we really think it is. Don't be a flopper. Every time you see LeBron James, think "stupid unforgiveness!" Okay? [Actually, I do like LeBron James. I pray he's in glory with us but he's got to quit doing that.]

2. Acknowledge That People Can Change

So we've got to step out and act in love. This is what love looks like: attitude before action and desire, not simply doing it because we have to. Number two—this is a big one—we have to acknowledge that people can change. Look at verses 10–14. "*I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus...*" This is the first time we see Onesimus' name in the letter. I wonder if, when Philemon was reading, he was thinking, "Please don't talk about Onesimus. Please don't talk about Onesimus. Please don't talk about Onesimus. The last thing I want to hear is Onesimus." This is the first time he's mentioned: "...whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you..."

So picture this for a moment: Tychicus is the one who hand delivers Paul's letter to the Colossian church. What might have happened if Tychicus was chosen to deliver this letter to Philemon? He might have said, "Hey, I've been with Paul. Here's a letter from Paul to you. It explains that he has sent Onesimus back to you."

Onesimus would probably be standing outside with his knees knocking together. “Hey, Tychicus, go in there and kind of feel Philemon out, okay? If he looks angry don’t hand him the letter yet, okay? Get him some food; get him ready. Then come out and tell me if the coast is clear. If not, I’m running again. My goodness, I don’t want that guy coming after me.”

No, Paul is so confident that Philemon is going to receive Onesimus back that he sends Onesimus with the letter. He acknowledges something that Philemon needs to grasp. I wonder if, when Philemon is reading this letter, he opens it up, begins to read it and thinks to himself, “Don’t bring up that dead beat Onesimus. Even the name makes my skin crawl. It makes my blood boil. All I did for that scum bag and what thanks do I get?” I’m going to assume some of Philemon’s reactions here because he’s a sinful man and that’s what comes into my head a lot of times. “Are you kidding me? Paul wants me to forgive him?”

How do we forgive when those feelings are so raw and wounds are so deep? We do so when we make a conscious decision that people are able to change. People don’t remain the same. Think for a moment of all the dumb things you’ve done in your life, especially when you were younger. Did you stay there? No. You grew up. You matured; you wised up.

This may be a hard truth for some of us to swallow, but others have. They are maturing. God’s changing them. He’s using circumstances in their lives to make them different, to make them a little more like an adult so they learn to make difficult decisions. I understand that it’s hard for many of us to get beyond the pain of being wronged but we must be willing to acknowledge the truth that people can change.

Here’s the thing: I’m preaching to the choir about this because if anybody is going to understand that people can change it’s Christians. My goodness, as a church we sing and pray; we preach about affirming and endorsing a faith that makes old things new, sinful things holy and foolish things wise. The very words that we’re devoting this preaching series to are the words of a man who hunted down Christians and sought to destroy the name of Christ during his young adult life. But he changed. We’re willing to give Paul the benefit of the doubt that he changed, but are we will to give the benefit of the doubt to those who have wronged us as well? Even if it’s just small changes?

How do you do this?

Bring in an outsider

The only Onesimus that Philemon knew was a fugitive, a runaway slave. A thief. The last time he saw Onesimus, the last remembrance in his mind of Onesimus, is a man running away with stolen property. The very mention of Onesimus has become synonymous with a loser and thief. But this wasn’t true of the Onesimus Paul knew. Paul saw a different man. He saw a changed man. He saw a transformed man. He saw what he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, that in Christ a man is a new creation, the old is gone and the new has come. Paul says in Philemon 11, “*Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.*”

Paul says later in the text, “*I would have been glad to keep him with me...*” (verse 13). He’s serving people; he’s helping people; he’s a refreshment to many people. It’s a hint to Philemon. “Philemon, Onesimus reminds me of you.” I wonder if Philemon gagged a little bit on that thought. “You’re kidding me, right? That thief? That scoundrel? ‘He reminds me of you?’ Come on, Paul!”

Paul goes on to say that Onesimus isn’t just a helper. Listen to how he describes Onesimus in verse 12: “*I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.*” I looked at everything Paul wrote about his friends and never does he say this of anyone else—Timothy, Barnabas, John Mark, Demas, Luke. Of these people Paul said things like, “They’re great. Men and women of the faith. They’re doing a great job. They’re nailing it.” He never says, “I’m sending my heart.” Paul says, “You’re taking part of me away from me.”

I’m going to tell you there is only one person in my life whom I would speak about that way and that would be my wife, Amanda. She is my heart. Paul is saying, “This relationship that I have with Onesimus is so strong, so resolute, so wonderful that I don’t want to give up this friendship. You’re taking part of me away but I want to do this because you need to forgive your brother. You need to make it right with this guy.” Paul says, “This thief, this runaway, is so near and dear to me that he is my very heart. Yes, he’s a coworker. Yes, he’s a friend.” Paul gives a glowing report to Philemon of this man, Onesimus. The best reference anybody could give.

You know why? Because Philemon—and you and I today—need another pair of eyes sometimes to change our perspective about people because we just keep revisiting the offense that has been done. We make it bigger, right? We’re like fishermen when it comes to acts of unforgiveness in our lives. The fish was about 10”, but then when we get home it’s 12”. When we tell our buddies it’s 18”; when our grandchildren hear about this story the fish is 26”. Well, the issue Philemon had was big, but as time

went on, I wonder if he exaggerated it to the point where we are today: "Man, that scoundrel took this much; he did this and that. It hurt so bad. I didn't think I was ever going to make it through that ordeal." Paul says, "Hey, Philemon, you're not seeing the same Onesimus I am."

We need to be willing to admit that our perspective is out of the realm of reality and be willing to hear from another person who says, "Hey, I think you need to give this person another chance. He's a different person now. He's changed." But maybe you don't have anybody around who can tell you that, so what do you do?

Take an optimistic viewpoint

How does your opinion of someone change? It begins and ends with love. In 1 Corinthians 13:7 we are told some of the characteristics of love. Love bears all things, but even more important, it believes all things. And even more important than that, it hopes all things.

So let's put it into the perspective of someone who has hurt you: "Mr. X has hurt me. I hope he changes, not so that he will see the error of his ways, or see how much of a filthy rotten scoundrel he is. No, I pray that Mr. X changes so that he can fully embrace the grace, love and blessings that come from a relationship with Jesus Christ. I want Mr. X to experience the love, compassion and mercy that I've experienced." Love hopes, even when someone has wronged you.

We tend to make reconciliation difficult by setting up this criteria: "I will forgive when I hear..." Or "I will forgive if I see this..." Instead we should be like the Prodigal Son's father who, at the very glimpse of his son ran to embrace the very person who had wronged him so much (Luke 15:11-32).

Love hopefully anticipates the change in others, prays for it and is willing to affirm it even when small steps are made. Embrace their change. They're trying.

Be open to being proven wrong

The next thing you need to do is be open to being wrong. I'm speculating a little bit, but I can picture in the time since Onesimus was gone that Philemon had done his share of speaking ill about him. Speaking truth, "That Onesimus stole from me after all at I did for him." He's sitting around the table and someone says, "Hey, I haven't seen Onesimus around for a while. Where's good old Onesimus? Where is he?"

"Oh that scoundrel, he stole from me. He went running like a coward. After all I did for him, all that I sacrificed for him! I gave him a roof over his head; I took care of him. He had food; had drink. He had all he needed; he had a job. He didn't have to worry about people coming and taking him away. He had a good life. I gave it to him. And what does that guy do? He stole from me then ran away. He's worthless!"

All of that's true. True, true, true, true, true. But as Christians we are called to speak the truth in love. Yes, he was worthless. Yes, he was unworthy of a second chance. All of that is true. I wonder if Philemon thought, "If I see that guy again, you just wait. He's going to be sorry. He's going to get a piece of my mind. I'm going to let him have it." And then to have a letter handed to him from a close friend who says, "He's a new man. He should be forgiven and he should be received as a brother, not a slave."

Wait a minute, Paul. What might people think? Might they say you're enabling? Might they say you're naïve? The world tells us that people don't get a second chance. It might mean you have to eat some humble pie. Philemon may have to eat some of his words when he sees Onesimus. I wonder when he sees Onesimus if Philemon isn't convicted by the Holy Spirit to say, "Hey, before you apologize, I've got some things I've got to apologize for. I've spoken ill of you. I said you would never change. But you have! I was wrong. You're something special. You're of great use to the Kingdom of God. You're a brother in Christ."

Some of us are unwilling to show forgiveness because maybe it means we need to ask forgiveness of the very people who have offended us and to say that we're sorry for some things. But what if that doesn't happen? What if reconciliation is impossible? What if the person never changes?

Maybe reconciliation can't possibly happen. Maybe the one who's wronged you is no longer around in your geographical area. Maybe you don't know where they are. Maybe there's so much water under the bridge that the distance between the two of you may never be bridged and restored to the way things used to be. Last week a woman in our church came up to me and said, "Powerful message. I didn't like it though. My dad is dead. How can I get reconciliation now? What do I do with that?" But Paul helps us in this. I want you to hear this very clearly this morning: God still wants us to forgive. It may take time but He wants us to get there. So how does that happen?

3. Affirm the Sovereignty of God

Reconciliation must happen even if it's difficult and it happens because we affirm the sovereignty of God which means, in theological terms, that God is in control of all things. We believe that. We affirm that. God is not sitting around thinking, "I wonder what is going to happen tomorrow." He knows all about it and you need to know that He knows. God is in control of all things. He has a plan for the good, the bad and the ugly parts of your life.

Paul speaks of God's sovereignty in verse 15: "*For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother.*" Paul says that God's sovereignty is at work here.

I know there are some who think, "Tim, this is easy for you to preach. You have not experienced the things I have." Without getting into details, there has been a great offense in my life done by another that has hung over me for years. It caused me to head on trajectories that have brought great difficulties and circumstances into my life. If I had the ability to jump into a DeLorean and go back in time, it would be to that very moment when something could have been done so it would have turned out differently. I've carried it all these years. I've cried over it. I have been depressed about it. It has haunted me for years. I don't know where the offender is today and I can't get an "I'm sorry." I can't go back and change things. I don't know if the offender is remorseful. I don't know if he's changed. I've got nothing. So if you think I don't understand what I'm preaching about and the implications of it you are sorely mistaken.

Sometimes God allows people to hurt us for a greater good

Even though from an earthly standpoint I can't tie that thing up into a big bow and make it all right, here's what I do know: God does sometimes allow people to offend or hurt you, or someone you love, for a greater good. I don't have time to get into this story but Joseph was harassed and hurt by his brothers. They did the unthinkable. Genesis 48-50 tells the story. They ruined his life. They did not say they were sorry until after the fact, at the very end when their fannies were on the line. He had been wronged. He had been hurt. He was sold into slavery. He was put in prison. His father had been told he was dead. They traded him in. I mean that's a pretty big offense. It's certainly more than your standard issue offense on a Sunday morning, right? Joseph reminds us of a hard but incredible truth: what man intends for harm God uses for good (Genesis 50:20).

Maybe you've got an offense in your life that you can't give up to forgive. You say, "It's too hard. The person isn't here to say they're sorry. I've got to tie this thing up in a bow. I've got to be able to release this thing. There's no answer and until I have an answer I'm not going to forgive." Here's your answer in those moments: what men, or women, intended for your harm God has an intent or use for good. Your pain and hurt might be given to you so that others might be blessed through it. Have you ever thought about that? Paul says that you can comfort others because you yourself have been comforted in your hour of need; that you might strengthen others, you might encourage others (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

I wonder if the horrors of Joseph's early life were somehow healed when he saw the silos being filled with the grain that would keep a nation fed during seven years of famine, including his wife and two children. I wonder if there was any consolation that his old father would live to see another day because while he endured a hard family experience, God used that, as difficult as it was, to put him in a position where he might be a blessing to others. But for Joseph to do that, he had to take his eyes off his own hurts and recognize God had a bigger plan. It was used for the greater good.

But I've got to be honest with you as a pastor, I don't know what greater good my hurt and my pain has done. To be quite honest with you, as I counsel others in the pains that they struggle with, I often don't see the greater good. I see a lot of hurt. I see a lot of wrong. I see a lot of injustice. So what do I do with that? The Bible tells us sometimes God allows people to hurt and offend us to grow us through suffering. I've got to be honest with you, it appears that Joseph is the exception not the rule. Does this mean all of our stories are going to be like Joseph's? Nope. So what do we do? We affirm that God uses suffering in our lives to make us more like His Son. We endure hardship like good soldiers and allow that suffering to make our hope for eternity all the more sweet and stronger. Our sufferings allow us the opportunity to cast our cares on Jesus because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). God uses suffering as a tool to grow us. It isn't easy, but friends, that's why we are to consider it pure joy when trials of many kinds come into our lives. Why? Because trials produce character, character produces hope, and hope produces perseverance (James 1:2-4). They grow us. They build us up. They make us stronger. That situation—that abuse, that struggle—has not happened in your life so that you can one day say, "Whoohoo! Now I get the whole picture." You will understand in glory but on this side of

glory, maybe you'll never see it. The reason is God says, "Hey, because I know that the way I grow people is to cause them a little pain, a little sorrow, so that they'll keep their eyes on Jesus" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Sometimes God allows people to hurt us to guide us back to Him

One final way God uses hurts and offenses by others is to guide us back to Himself. I think back to the history of Israel. They were offended by other people. They were hurt by other nations; they were ravaged and decimated. At times it seemed like God empowered their enemies to pound on Israel. And He did. He brought issues into Israel's life the same way He brings them into our lives. He allows bad things to happen to us so that He can guide us back to Himself. You see, without suffering, we have no need to cry out to Him. Without suffering, we have no need to run to Him. Without suffering and turmoil, we don't need to draw near to Him. Without suffering and turmoil and offenses and hurts, we have no reason to cling to Him.

I don't know why God allows bad things to happen to good people. I don't know. But this truth I do know: none of it catches God off guard or unaware, and He plans to use it in ways you would never imagine. Maybe you won't see it in this life but you will know it and you will experience it when He wipes away every one of our tears and ushers us into the Kingdom. One day we will stand before Him and say, "Just as You forgave me, Jesus, as hard as it was, as difficult as it was, I forgave that person so that at this moment I can hear, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' " So in the meantime, forgive by trusting God and His ways. Act out of love, acknowledge people can change, and affirm God's sovereignty. Over time—step by little step, day by little day—with the help of God and others you will be able to forgive as Christ Jesus has forgiven you.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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