



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

We All Have a Part to Play

Philemon | Part 3

Tim Badal | May 31, 2015 | Philemon 17-25



Today we finish up our three-week series from the one-page letter of Philemon, which is between Titus and Hebrews at the end of the New Testament. We come again to the subject we've been looking at: reconciliation through forgiveness. We've been learning about this letter the Apostle Paul wrote while he was in prison in Rome. The shortest of his letters, this was not written to a church or to a group of churches but to one individual, a man named Philemon.

Philemon was a man who lived in Colossae which was located in modern-day Turkey. He was a man of great means, a master of servants and slaves. He was also a prominent member in the church of Colossae which met in his home. He no doubt was one of the leaders of that church. Paul wrote this letter because of something that took place in the life of Philemon.

Philemon had one particular slave or servant, whom he had provided and cared for, named Onesimus. Onesimus had made a decision for whatever reason—which we're not given—to steal goods and maybe money from Philemon and flee to the city of Rome, where he disappeared to start a new life. Philemon was hurt and offended by it, no doubt. If someone were to steal from us, we would feel that sense of betrayal and loss.

While in Rome, Onesimus tried to build a new life apart from Philemon and the people he had known in Colossae. In doing so, he came into contact with the Apostle Paul. Not knowing that Paul and Philemon had a relationship, Onesimus heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and was transformed by it. Through Philemon's friend Paul, Onesimus realized not only that he needed a Savior in Jesus Christ, but also that trusting Christ wasn't just a vertical relationship. Receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ changed his horizontal relationships as well.

Because of these changes, Paul told Onesimus he had to do the unthinkable: go back to Colossae and right the wrong he had done against Philemon. I want you to recognize that could have meant imprisonment or the dismembering of his body. In the Near East, if you were found guilty of being a thief, your hand could be cut off as a reminder of the sin you committed. It could also mean death, depending on the judge's leniency or strictness with regard to that crime.

So Onesimus was given a tall task: if he really was a changed follower of Jesus Christ, he would do the hard thing of returning to Philemon and the place of the crime to seek forgiveness and pursue reconciliation. This letter was a reference from Paul to Philemon on Onesimus' account, to say that Onesimus was a new man who had become a great helper to the Apostle Paul. Paul recommended that Philemon receive Onesimus back into the home, not as a slave, but now as an equal brother in Christ who deserved full forgiveness and reconciliation.

What we have before us is the closing of that letter, Philemon 17-25, which is a reminder to all of us that we all have a part to play in reconciliation and forgiveness. This is what Paul says as he finishes the letter:

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If [Onesimus] has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

This last week in Chicago, sports have been “The Tale of Two Cities.” I know that many of you are aware that our Blackhawks once again are going to the Stanley Cup finals. That’s an exciting thing. If you look at the Blackhawks, you recognize a team that really is functioning on all cylinders. Everybody is doing what they’re supposed to be doing. The front office has established a wonderful team. The coach seems to be one whose strategy everybody has bought into. The offense, the defense, even the goal tenders, seem to be doing everything they need to do.

On the other hand, while they share the same arena, the Chicago Bulls find themselves in a very different place. They fired their coach after five years. Now, you would think the Bulls just finished up what would be considered a deep playoff run. Once again being vanquished by their nemesis LeBron James, the team found itself—as it was going to the playoffs—not with the killer instinct of winning a championship, but with the beginning of infighting.

If you’re any kind of Chicago sports fan, you began to hear some of the concerns the front office had with the coach and some of the consternation the coach had with players. And then we heard that at the last game of the Bulls’ season there was fighting among the players as to who would be the “alpha dog,” who would be the main scorer. And things began to fall apart.

Two teams heading in two directions. One commentator put it this way. “The difference between the Bulls and the Hawks is that on the Hawks, everybody knows the part they’re to play, and they do it to the best of their ability. With the Bulls, everybody wants to play someone else’s part. Everybody wants someone else’s job, and they fight one another to try to get that.”

In our message today we have “The Tale of Two Cities.” With regard to reconciliation and forgiveness, you can choose to play someone else’s part, to do someone else’s job, which usually results in chaos. Or, you can play the part that God has given you, do it to the best of your abilities with the equipping and the strengthening of the Holy Spirit, and allow forgiveness and reconciliation to take place.

Paul’s got three words for us in this passage:

1. He has a word to the offender.

2. He has a word to the offended.

3. He has a word for each of us, whether we've been offended or are an offender or find ourselves in a place of utter tranquility.

Let’s look first at the issue of the offender in verses 17 through 25. What’s the role the offender plays? In our text we see that the role of the offender is played by Onesimus. The villain in the story, if you’re looking for one, is this man who has been cared for and ministered to, who has found protection and provision in the house of Philemon. He’s the guy who messed things up. He’s the reason for this letter. He coveted after that which was not his own, he stole it and then he ran like the coward he was. It was either an act of stupidity, selfishness or sin.

Onesimus is a trouble-maker. He’s a problem. What we begin to find out is that Onesimus at some point sees the error of his ways. He sees that what he has done is wrong. Maybe he knew it when he took the stuff initially. Maybe it took him years to figure it out. We don’t know, but we recognize who the offender in this letter was. It was Onesimus. He was the problem.

Before I get to the role of the offenders, I want to remind us of something. It's very easy to look at a guy like Onesimus and say, "What a scoundrel. What a scumbag. What a problem child. What a good-for-nothing individual." But something I really want us to get into our heads and hearts is that while Onesimus is an offender, so are each one of us. We've offended a God Who is holy and righteous, Who has given us everything we need: provision, protection and peace. The Bible says, "For all have sinned and fall short of that glory" (Romans 3:23). Each one of us is an offender against a holy God.

Likewise, just as we are offenders of God because of that vertical relationship being strained and in fact destroyed, we now have strained relationships with one another. So we're not only offenders toward God, we offend others. The very essence of your getting up this morning and interacting with another human being allows you to run the risk of offending somebody throughout the day. As I said last week, there's probably a good chance this week that you not only offended one person but many people—through your words, actions, body language, a joke that you said, a neglect of someone or maybe because of an abuse that has been done.

Our newscasts are filled with stories of offenders. Some of the offenses are small petty grievances. Others involve theft or abuse or even bloodshed. We live in a world where humans are often given to hurting and offending others because of stupidity, selfishness or sin.

Before we leave this series on Philemon, I want to remind us of how easy it is to offend others, how easy it comes from human nature for us to say hurtful and do hurtful things to those we know, even in those most intimate relationships we have in our home. It is easy for us as humans to offend others. So before you think, "What a dirty, rotten, filthy scoundrel Onesimus is," be reminded that as a real person he is a type of you and me. We've all offended both God and one another.

1. The role of the offender

So what do we do when we offend? What do we do when we hurt others?

Repentance

The first step to pursuing reconciliation and forgiveness as the offender is repentance. How was Onesimus going to prove that he was sorry for stealing from Philemon? How was he going to prove that he desired a second chance? The answer is not explicitly written in the text, but it's there. How do we know that Onesimus got it right?

The answer is: he went back home. Philemon would not be in the Scriptures if Onesimus never went back—if somewhere between Rome and Colossae Onesimus made the decision that it would be too painful to go back, that the opportunity Philemon would have to throw him in jail or harm him or put him to death was much more than he could bear.

Remember, Tychicus was the guy who carried the letter to Colossae as he accompanied Onesimus on this trip. If Onesimus said, "I'm out of here, Tychicus," and ran away, there would have been no need for Philemon to have received this letter. "Hey, by the way, Onesimus is a really swell guy. Onesimus is a guy who has great value to me as a brother in Christ." What good is it to write a letter of recommendation if the guy that you've recommended is now on the lam again? So we recognize that Onesimus did the right thing because if Onesimus hadn't shown up the letter would never have made it to Philemon's hands—let alone into the canon of Scripture.

As we think back to the things we've done this past week that hurt others—or maybe decades back where we did something to harm somebody—one of the most important things we must do to pursue reconciliation and forgiveness is to go back to the scene of the crime. We must go back to that moment when we uttered those words, back where we did that deed, and humbly say, "I understand that it may cost me something. It may mean there's a penalty at the end of that journey. It may cause me a whole lot of suffering as it would have for Onesimus. But I'm going to humble myself because the better thing, the harder thing, to do is to go make it right. I'm going to go back to that person I offended, that situation where I caused pain, and I'm going to look that person in the eye and say from the depths of my heart, 'I am sorry. I am sorry.'

I want you to recognize that many of us will utter the words “I’m sorry” and not mean them. Repentance is not simply saying, “I’m sorry about something.” It is an about-face. It’s an acknowledgement that the way I was going before is the way I will not go any longer.

So Onesimus was running anywhere Philemon wasn’t. He didn’t want to see Philemon ever again. But repentance said, “I’m going to stop running; I’m going to turn around and I’m going to make my way back to the point where I departed from the master who provided for me.” So he repents. He says he’s sorry. He reverses direction and he makes his way back.

Some of us need to go back to the place where the crime was committed. We’ve got to go back to where we hurt someone. There’s a possibility that person might not receive us back. Remember, Onesimus had no idea how Philemon was going to respond. But he did the hard thing and obeyed.

That’s why this letter is so beautiful. Paul wrote it as a letter of recommendation, on behalf of Onesimus, to say, “Receive him back, Philemon. He’s a different man. When he gets there, forgive him and treat him like a Christian brother.” But there was no guarantee that was going to take place. “

Onesimus needed to admit, “It wasn’t because you were a bad master or a hard master. You provided for me and took care of me. I had no right to steal that stuff.”

Some of us need to repent. We need to go back to that place and that moment, and we need to seek to right the wrong we committed. We need to take ownership of it. Some of us need to very clearly go to the person we’ve offended with no ifs, ands or buts. No maybes added to it. No disclaimers. “I blew it. I’m sorry. And I want you to be assured that it’s not going to happen again.” That is a spirit of repentance.

Restitution

Notice the second thing that came about when Onesimus went back to Philemon. There was a debt to be paid. In verses 18 and 19 Paul says, “*If [Onesimus] has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.*” In verse 19 he says, “*I will repay it.*”

So there’s a problem. If Onesimus was just a runaway slave, his coming back would have been payment enough. But Onesimus didn’t just leave with his own stuff. He took Philemon’s stuff with him. And what it surely seems like from the text is that Onesimus didn’t have that stuff anymore. He had a debt he couldn’t pay.

So he came back empty-handed. “Well, where’s my stuff? Where’s my wife’s jewelry? Where’s the flatware? Where’s the cash you took from the table before you left? Where is all that?” Onesimus had nothing. And Paul says it needed to be taken care of.

Notice in the text Paul uses the word “if” twice. He says, “If he’s wronged you,” or “If he owes you anything.” Paul is not bringing into question whether Onesimus had stolen things. What he’s saying is, “If, Philemon, this is still a big deal to you, if you can’t get over this, then I want you to know you’ll be compensated. If it is too hard for you to give up the things that have been taken from you, then I will repay you. I will make restitution.”

That’s the second thing offenders need to do. We need to repent and then we need to make restitution. Is there something monetary or physical that we need to do to compensate someone for their loss? This issue of restitution doesn’t find its beginning in the book of Philemon. It can be found earlier in the laws of Moses. The first part of Exodus 22 speaks of the common laws and principles surrounding restitution. Leviticus 6 also speaks of truths regarding restitution. So we know that God believes in and blesses the idea that when we offend others, we should not only repent—expressing our utter remorse over the sin and the desire to change paths—but we should do some physical, temporal acts that will show a heart that has been convicted of sin.

It may be the giving of money. It may be community service. Our legal system is full of restitution. You wrong someone, you break the law, and they may say, “You’re going to do so many hours of community service.” Why? As a law-breaker, you’re doing

restitution to prove that you are changing course. You're going to do something else. You may pay fines to show that you are willing and able to right the wrongs that have been committed.

Now, in Old Testament times, if you took something from someone—whether or not they knew it—and you were unable to return it, usually restitution meant you would replace what was gone and give a fifth above and beyond this. But the gospel seems to indicate in the New Testament that when you wronged somebody, it wasn't just the law that held you accountable. The believer was to do all he could to go above and beyond the call of duty—not just to restore what was taken, plus a little extra—but to be extravagant in their restitution.

I want to remind you that when we talk about restitution and repentance, the Bible always says that first and foremost, when we hurt another—when we wrong another, when we sin against another—the first place where we are to seek repentance and restitution is with God Himself.

When David committed the great sin of adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged to have her husband, Uriah, murdered, David went to a quiet place by himself, and in Psalm 51 he said, "Against You, O Lord, have I sinned." Had he sinned against people? Absolutely. But what he needed to recognize, and what you and I must recognize, is that we will never have right horizontal relationships if our vertical relationship isn't right. So David went first to God and said, "I've sinned against You, and I need to repent of my sins. Cleanse me of this sin. Purge me of all these things."

So there's restitution that needs to be made. Well, how in the world do you repay God? God says He does not desire the blood of rams and goats. But what God desires, the restitution God wants, is a humble and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). So what we do as believers is first of all, before we get right with our fellow humanity, we get right with God.

We say, "God, I have sinned against You. I see my sin. I recognize it as an affront to a holy God like You. I turn from it and ask that You cleanse me from it; lead me and empower me to live differently. I can't do any community service for You, God, to rectify this." So what God demands is that we humble ourselves and see our sin as the affront that it is.

But how do we make restitution with man? Notice, Onesimus can't pay his debt. Paul says, "If he's wronged you or owes you anything, charge it to my account." Why? Onesimus doesn't have the stuff. He doesn't have the ability to repay. So what do we do? There are some circumstances where restitution isn't possible. There are times when restitution may be needed, but there may be no money available to rectify the situation.

A godly reputation

So what do we do? We strive to live out a godly reputation. The text tells us that Onesimus didn't have any money and he was unable to pay back. But his heart had been changed.

Reviewing for a moment the issue of reputation, Luke 19 helps us with this. This is the story of Zacchaeus, a tax collector who stole from people. He had an encounter with Jesus and was changed. He repented of his sin, and Luke 19:7 tells us that he vowed before all the people, "If I have sinned against you, if I've stolen from you, I will repay—not only your money and one fifth more required by law, but I will repay four times what was stolen from you."

That kind of restitution leads to a godly reputation. Think about it. If you were one of the people Zacchaeus had stolen from, and a year down the road you're going about things at your house and Zacchaeus comes to the door and says, "Hey, I'm Zacchaeus. I did your taxes. You really only owed \$5,000 for your taxes, but I took \$7,500. So here's \$2,500 back. And by the way, here's another \$10,000 because a Christian should not steal. I've met Jesus and I want to return to you four times what I've stolen."

How is Onesimus going to do that? He doesn't have any money. How are you going to do it when you offend somebody and restitution isn't going to help? Paul says, "The one who was useless to us now has become useful."

As a young person—and I can't tell you how many times this happened—I wronged a lot of people. I wronged my parents who were nothing but godly examples to me. I wronged a church that did nothing but honor God's Word and teach me the right things. I wronged individuals legally and hurt others because of dumb things I said and did. I've got a bad rap sheet.

You ask, "How bad were you really?" I was sitting with some people who said, "You know, you make a lot more of your upbringing than it really was." I asked them, "Do you want me to bring up the legal file? Do you want to see it?" I did some dumb, stupid things. I offended people.

I can't pay restitution to every person. I don't have enough money in the world. But what I can do is what Onesimus did, and that is show myself as a repentant sinner who has been saved by God's grace and live my life to the best of my ability, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and show that I'm a different person, that I'm trustworthy, that I'm not a rabble-rouser, that I am one who is given to acts of service and love and care. I can show that the old Tim is gone and the new Tim has come. I can do that.

And that's what Onesimus was going to have to do. If you've offended someone, the best thing you can do is get right with God; then the best way you can get right with people is show that you're a different person. "I'm not that person who stole from you. I'm not that person who abused you. I'm not that person who wronged you. I'm not that person who hurt you. I'm a different person. I wish I could pay all that back. I wish there was some way I could give you something back that would fix it, but I can't. So what I have to show you is that God has transformed my life."

That's what Onesimus was called to do, and that's what you and I are called to do when we offend others. It's going to mean our lives are going to change and we're going to take humble and obedient steps to prove to the world that we're different.

That's the role of the offender. Maybe today you're an Onesimus. This is what you're called to do: strive for repentance, seek to make restitution and strive for a godly reputation in all that people see in you.

2. The response of the offended

Maybe you find yourself in a position like Philemon, the offended. What's your response? When someone comes to you repentant and seeking restitution, when someone desires to live a godly life, you—the one who has been hurt—you need to know how to respond.

Receive them back

Paul says the first response is to receive that person back. Notice in verse 17, "*So if you consider me your partner, [Philemon,] 'receive [Onesimus] as you would receive me.'*" Let's talk about this for a moment.

"Receive Onesimus—that dirty rotten scoundrel, the guy who stole from me—I'm to receive him, Paul, as I would receive you? When Onesimus makes his way back, I should pull out the nice flatware, some of the very stuff he took from me in the first place? I am to roll out the red carpet? I am to bring out the best food, the best drink? I'm to give him the best room in the house as my honored guest? I'm to bring my favorite friends and love on this guy and care for this guy?"

Yep!

"The same love I would show you, Paul—my dear friend who's never wronged me—I'm to show this one?"

You bet.

"I'm to receive him as a partner with full fellowship? I'm to receive him as I receive you, Paul?"

You've got it. Paul says, "You're supposed to do all of this for Onesimus."

You see, what we do when we're offended is we say, "I forgive you, but I'm going to make sure you can never hurt me again." We're going to stay at arm's length. In a culture where people said that you can be forgiven and still hold out the stiff arm against the offender, Paul says, "No more stiff arm, Philemon. When Onesimus comes, I want you to embrace him like a brother. I want you to show him love. I want you to show him mercy. I want you to show him gratitude, as you would show me, a close friend."

Refresh them through encouragement

What's that going to look like? It's going to involve refreshing him in encouragement. So you receive him back. You embrace him as one who has never wronged you in the first place. And then you refresh him. Notice in verse 20, "*Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.*"

It sounds like Paul is saying, "Refresh me." But if you remember back to how Paul refers to Onesimus in verse 12, you'll understand exactly what Paul is saying. Let's go back to verse 12 for a moment. "*I am sending [Onesimus] back to you, sending my very heart.*" So then when he says, "*I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ,*" who is Philemon to refresh? Paul's heart. Who's Paul's heart? Onesimus.

Paul is saying, "Onesimus is going to come back and he's going to try to rebuild his reputation. He's going to try to show you that he is a new man. When he gets back, he will try to put together a life that shows he is a different person. And who's going to help him in that process? You are, Philemon—the one who was offended. You are going to partner with Onesimus. You're going to have *koinonia* fellowship. You're going to be partners in this, arm-in-arm. You're going to do this together. You're going to encourage Onesimus step by step to make a new life for himself."

Offended individual, your job is just that. When someone comes in repentance and seeks forgiveness, your job isn't to say with gritted teeth, "You're forgiven and I guess I have to...." Your job is to say, "I see that God's doing a work in your life. I see that God has forgiven you. Now my job is to encourage you and strengthen you every step of the way so that you can continue to live out this reconciliation—not only in your life in relationship with God, but also in your relationship with me."

Now here's the problem. That refreshment is a hard thing. You see, Onesimus is a human being who has been transformed by Jesus, but let me remind you that each one of us has been transformed by Jesus and we still hurt people, right? We still wrong people.

We see here that Onesimus is going to go back and say, "Philemon, please forgive me. I've stolen from you. I've wronged you and I want a second chance." And Philemon says, "All right. I will give you a second chance. Paul says you're different and based on Paul's word and your return, I'm going to give you that second chance."

Remain true to your forgiveness

But here's the problem. Three weeks from now Onesimus is going to blow it, right? Probably not stealing, but maybe he'll do something else. And what is our human nature? ? "Here we go again." You're right back to the old self, holding a record of wrongs.

Many of us (This happens in marriages all the time) tell someone they're forgiven. But when they commit another grievance, we dig up that old grievance that's seven years old. "Here you go again. I knew you would do it again. I knew you really hadn't changed."

So here's the job of the offended. Not only are you there to refresh them, you are to remain true to your forgiveness. Paul says in verse 21, "*Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*" So when we are offended and someone's trying to right the ship, someone's trying to get beyond the rap they had in the past, they're going to do another wrong. They're going to mess up. Your job is not to withhold forgiveness and hold onto that record of wrong; your job is to love and encourage them every step of the way.

When I was about 25 or 26 years old I took on this role as your pastor. I want you to know that my last deed on the rap sheet was when I was about 18 or 19. Six or seven years is not a lot of time, right? I remember there were times when I would do something a bit unorthodox in how I led in the church and people who knew the old Tim would say, "There he goes again." I'll tell you, there's nothing more devastating than for someone to bring up your past and shove it in your face. Does anybody like that? Does anybody want that?

You see, that's why the devil does it. I tell you, we do the devil's work. The only people who bring up the past are the devil and White Sox fans. Okay? If you talk to a Sox fan, they're like, "Well, we won the World Series a couple years ago." That's what the devil does. They live in the past.

Seriously, here's the thing. When someone wrongs you, the last thing you need to do is the very thing you hate yourself, which is to shove in their faces the wrongs they've done in the past. They know it. Let me tell you something. I know every one of the things I have done. I have paid dearly for them. I am embarrassed by them. And I know if you're a human being with any self-respect in your veins, you know them, you've rehearsed them, you wish you could go back and address those things. You've been there; you've done that. You don't need someone throwing it in your face in a hostile way. What you need is someone who's going to embrace and love you for where you are today.

So you say, "Tim, this seems all so familiar. The offender. The offended. Repentance. Restitution. A godly reputation. The offended receiving back and refreshing and remaining true in their forgiveness. I've heard this story before. Where have I heard this?"

Brothers and sisters, Philemon is a picture of the gospel. It's a picture of the offender—you and me. We've offended a holy God. We sinned against Him. We tried to steal His glory. And the problem is the debt we have is so great that we can't return what has been taken. "For the wage of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The only thing we can do is be put under a death penalty.

So what happens? Well, Onesimus couldn't pay his debt, so he needed someone to come and make the debt payment for him. You and I couldn't make the payment. Paul couldn't make it for us. The only One Who could make the payment of debt for us was a Man Who was also God, named Jesus Christ.

Jesus came and died on a cross. When He went to the cross He said, "Father, they can't pay the debt for themselves. They are offenders. They've offended Us, but they can't pay it themselves. So I'm going to the cross." And what Jesus said was what Paul said: "Charge it to my account." When He bled on the cross, He said, "Charge Tim's sin to my account."

And the only thing He asks is that we repent and live for Him. Do you know what Jesus does when we do that? He receives us back. He embraces us—not as slaves, not as servants, but as sons and daughters, as part of the family of God. He receives us. He refreshes us. He gives us the Holy Spirit, Who is our peace, our joy and our righteousness. He embraces us and gives us all we need.

Listen, you and I sin all the time after that fact, right? Jesus doesn't come and say, "I knew it. I knew if I forgave you, you were just going to do it again. So there goes My forgiveness." No, Jesus—on our behalf right now—is interceding.

And every time the devil comes—and he does—he says, "Hey, did you see what Badal did? Did you see what that dummy did? He sinned against You again." Jesus just looks to His Father and says, "Do you see what he did over here? I forgave that one, too." "What about this one? Father, I forgave that one too. All of that has been paid for."

Jesus never reneges on His forgiveness, and neither should we. That's what forgiveness is all about. Praise the Lord! That's how we need to forgive. Do you think it's hard for Jesus? Yes. He gave up His life. Is it going to be hard for you? Yes. This is not easy. This is some of the hardest teaching Scripture gives—to forgive. But we're called to do it.

3. The rest of the us

So let me close with this. What's the message for the rest of us? Maybe you're not Philemon. Maybe you're not Onesimus. What about those of us who are living pretty good lives? We haven't offended anybody and we're not offended by anybody. What are we to do? What does Philemon teach us?

Remembering the debt we owe

When Paul speaks of Onesimus' debt, he reminds Philemon of his debt as well. He says in verse 19, *"I...write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your [Philemon] owing me even your own self."*

We've already talked about our vertical relationship, that we all owe a debt to God. We've got that. And if you've never bowed the knee to that realization, if you have never accepted Christ as your Savior for that debt, then the Bible says you will pay the wage in a place called hell.

So what Jesus asks of us, what He demands of us, is that we bow the knee to Him, that we trust Him as our Lord and Savior and give our lives to Him. If you've never done that, don't leave this place without talking to the person sitting next to you, talking to me or talking to someone at the Welcome Center. We would like to help you understand what the gospel is, what it involves and how you can be saved by Jesus Christ.

But what about the debt we carry with others? Philemon was focused in on what had been stolen from him. Philemon was thinking, "What about my money? What about my stuff?" He forgot that while Onesimus owed him something, Philemon owed Paul his very life. When we have something taken from us, when we're offended, we are quick to talk about the injustice and what someone has taken from us.

But let us remember that in the essence of living life, we have accrued a debt almost every day of our lives. Just speaking for myself, I'm indebted deeply to my parents. They provided for me; they cared for me; they gave me everything I needed so I could be here today. They sacrificed for everything—all my daily necessities—and my dad makes this clear to me: I can never repay him for what he's done. No amount of money will take care of it.

I'm indebted to friends. I'm indebted to extended family for their love and support, for their telephone calls in the middle of the night when I'm lost or broken. They love and care. I'm indebted to my wife who is full of mercy and grace, who has loved me in spite of myself. I'm indebted to my children who remind me of the simple things, who remind me what it is to be a child of God.

I'm indebted to a church that holds me accountable, that keeps me from sin. I'm indebted to a church that gives me opportunities to use my gifts. I'm indebted to people I've had long-time relationships with; I'm indebted to the strangers who have ministered to me and I haven't even known it. I tell you—I am indebted.

So what gives me the right to put on someone else the full payment of what they owe me? I can't repay my parents. I can't repay you. I can't repay Amanda. I can't repay my children. I can't repay any of that. Yet, when someone wrongs me, do I demand full payment? When you demand someone full payment for what they've done, do you remember the people you owe?

Getting ready for more hurts

Paul finishes this letter by saying, *"Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do...Aristarchus...and Luke, my fellow workers."*

Notice in the text he has two other names: Mark and Demas. If you know anything about Paul, you know that some of the greatest heartbreak that Paul had as a follower of Jesus Christ was when he was deserted by two people: John Mark (Acts 15:36-41) and Demas (2 Timothy 4). Not only the betrayal of their walking away from the faith, but also all of the time and energy Paul had poured into these young men—and they walked away.

Paul is reminding us that maybe no one's offended you, maybe you're doing all right and perhaps you haven't offended anybody. But people are going to hurt you in the days to come. Philemon is a reminder not only of how you deal with past issues and hurts, but how to deal with future offenses. People are going to betray you. They're going to hurt you. They're going to wrong you in some way. How in that moment are you going to respond?

Relying on God through it all

Philemon gives us the way to reconciliation and peace. How do we get there? Whether we've been hurt or we're the one who has done the hurting, what do we need? We need the grace of almighty God. We have to rely on God. If you have hurt somebody, rely on God's grace to save and do the hard things that lead to repentance. If you have been offended, rely on God's grace to get you through that trial and trouble; rely on that grace to give mercy in your hour of need.

We need God's grace in this moment. We need God's grace when trouble comes. We need God's grace when those issues come—and they will—so that we can live out the truths of this letter and pursue forgiveness and reconciliation, just as Christ has given us.

Let us be reminded of this truth as we close Philemon: forgive one another, just as Christ has forgiven you.

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

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