

OVERVIEW OF BOOK OF PHILEMON – FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

INTRODUCTION:

The gospel of Jesus Christ should transform all of our relationships. Not only are we new creatures because we have been redeemed, regenerated and now indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but we belong to a new family of fellow believers. We all now relate to one another as brothers and sisters in the common faith and fellowship of the Holy Spirit who is progressively making us more like our Lord Jesus Christ. This morning we are going to study how the gospel should impact **forgiveness** and **reconciliation** in the body of Christ.

Philemon is only **25 verses**, but it contains one of the clearest pictures in the New Testament of how the gospel should transform relationships.

The letter involves three primary people:

- **Paul** — an imprisoned elderly apostle (this was his first Roman imprisonment – around 61 AD) and he was the spiritual father of the other two key players in this scenario; He could have exercised his authority to command Philemon. Yet he chose to take the more conciliatory route of appealing in love – speaking with great tact and delicately navigating a difficult situation – He played the role of the Reconciler – patterned after the Intercessory and reconciling work of Christ
- **Philemon** — He was definitely the wronged party; a wealthy Christian who lives in Colossae and hosts the church which meets in his home; he also is a prominent slaveowner and friend of the Apostle Paul; He must have encountered Paul on his third missionary journey in Ephesus where he was saved and returned to his home city; He certainly had every right to punish Onesimus severely
- **Onesimus** — a slave belonging to Philemon who had apparently wronged his master (probably stole a significant sum of money from him) run away to hide himself in the big city of Rome and somehow encountered Paul there; he was converted and became an encouragement to Paul there in Rome; His name interestingly means “useful” – He represents a transformed character – formerly useless and even harmful to his master but now having proven himself useful to Paul; We do not have to be defined by our past

The **Occasion** of Paul writing this letter is quite simple. He is sending Tychicus with a letter to the church at Colossae and he wants to also send a personal letter to Philemon appealing to him to graciously forgive and restore Onesimus to his former position in the household without suffering any punishment for his offense. Onesimus has come to understand that he cannot continue to remain AWOL – he must go back and make things right with Philemon now that he has become a believer. So this is a very personal note from Paul – more like a postcard than a letter. It is tender and compassionate and very direct in its appeal to Philemon. Paul expects a positive response and full reconciliation as a result. But Onesimus is returning without any guarantees about how Philemon will respond.

BIG IDEA

CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION CUT ACROSS ALL HUMAN DISTINCTIONS AS WE RESPOND IN THE SAME MANNER AS WE HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN BY GOD

C.S. Lewis once said “Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea, until he has someone or something to forgive.”

OVERVIEW

The short book of Philemon was written by Paul from prison to persuade Philemon to receive back his runaway and now converted slave Onesimus in the spirit of forgiveness and Christian brotherhood. The themes of forgiveness and reconciliation are featured within the complex social dynamic of first century slavery. The grace of Jesus Christ which we have freely received must also be freely extended towards others.

Before we work our way thru the details of the story, we need to take note of the institution of slavery back in Paul’s day. It was a very widespread practice – estimates are that maybe 1/3 of the people in the Roman Empire or more were subjects of some type of slavery or indentured service. There was a marked difference from the type of slavery practiced in later centuries where people were treated very cruelly as nothing more than property.

The slavery reflected in **Philemon** and the slavery practiced in **early America** shared the basic reality that one human being could legally be **owned** by another –something that anyone should consider morally repugnant, but they were **very different institutions in their origins, legal structures, social purposes, and especially their relationship to race.**

Roman slavery was not fundamentally a racial institution

In the Roman Empire, slaves came from **many different peoples and regions**. Romans enslaved people they captured in war, people from conquered territories, people born to enslaved mothers, and people who entered slavery through various forms of debt or other circumstances.

American slavery, by contrast, became overwhelmingly associated with the **enslavement of Africans and their descendants**. Beginning in the colonial period and especially by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American slavery had become a deeply entrenched **racial caste system**.

A Roman slave was not necessarily an agricultural field laborer. Slaves worked in virtually every sector of Roman society. A slave might be:

- a household servant
- agricultural laborer
- craftsman
- cook
- tutor
- accountant
- secretary
- physician

- teacher
- administrator
- mine worker
- construction worker

By contrast, American slavery—particularly in the antebellum South—was heavily concentrated in **large-scale agricultural labor**, especially cotton, tobacco, rice, sugar, and other cash crops.

Roman slaves could sometimes obtain freedom

One significant difference is the Roman practice of **manumission**, the formal freeing of slaves. A Roman master could emancipate a slave, and Roman society had established mechanisms by which this could occur. Freed slaves could become productive members of Roman society. In fact, some freedmen became quite prosperous.

That does **not** mean Roman slavery was **humane**. Slaves were still legally property and could be subjected to severe treatment, sexual exploitation, physical punishment, separation from family, and even death.

So we are not trying to draw a conclusion that there was nothing morally wrong with slavery back in Paul's day.

So the obvious question is why didn't Jesus and why didn't Paul and why didn't the first century church focus a lot of their attention on directly attacking the institution of slavery? Here you have Paul actually sending Onesimus back to resume his slave status and to submit to Philemon.

Of course you could ask the same question about a lot of other evils in society. What about abortion? What about oppressive child labor? What about mistreatment of women? What about excessive taxation? ... and the list goes on.

The answer gets down to the **priority** of the gospel message in saving and transforming individuals and the mission of the church. We are not primarily called to a **mission of social activism** – even though in our political structure we might be able to have more of an impact than in other forms of government. As Christianity changed individuals, the seeds were planted of respect for man made in the image of God and the traits of love and compassion and mercy and kindness and gentleness, etc. that led to the transformation of society in a wide range of areas including the eventual elimination of human slavery.

This relationship between church and social and political activism is a difficult space to navigate. On the one hand you have seen movements like the **Moral Majority** of Jerry Falwell whose mission could be summed up as follows: **Christians should not withdraw from American political life; they should bring biblical moral convictions into the public square**. But one could ask, What did the Moral Majority with all of its devotion of time and resources, actually accomplish?

The movement started by Charlie Kirk – known as **Turning Point USA** – has a similar agenda with very strong pressure being exerted on churches to mobilize politically and socially around conservative causes. They would be very critical of the type of **non-political posture** that

churches like ours have adopted. The mantra is: All that is necessary for evil to flourish is for righteous people to withdraw from the fight.

There is some truth to that ... but there also is a matter of **priority**.

From a biblical perspective, there is a useful distinction between:

Our Biblical mission: Proclaim the Gospel; Make disciples of Jesus Christ; establish biblical local churches that will help people grow spiritually and will reproduce

Vs.

An overt Political mission: Influence government and public policy according to particular moral and cultural convictions.

That raises an important theological question for the church:

Should the church primarily seek to transform society through political power, or primarily seek to transform people through the gospel? You can't do everything.

The New Testament certainly teaches Christians to be **salt and light**, to uphold righteousness, to pray for government leaders, and to live as responsible citizens. But its primary mission for the church is the **proclamation of Christ and the making of disciples** (The Great Commission -- **Matthew 28:19–20**). Also Jesus and the Apostle Paul certainly did not model a lifestyle of political and social activism.

But the NT does stress the spiritual equality of master and slave. It advocated for conduct that halted many of the abuses of the practice. Christianity definitely was a major factor eventually in the end of slavery.

So I don't have the final answers in this complicated realm. Different individuals will be called by God to bear different responsibilities in these two spheres. I am not advocating for withdrawing from the battles over societal evils. But I also am not surprised that Paul and the first century church did not tackle slavery head-on. In one sense it would have been suicide for their biblical mission to create such antagonism over one particular social issue that was so prevalent.

Enough said on that subject – let's work our way thru the text of Philemon.

I. (:1-7) ATMOSPHERE FOR FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION -- EFFECTIVE FAITH SHOWS ITSELF IN PRACTICAL LOVE

A. (:1-3) GREETING: FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN CHRIST INVOLVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS AS PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL

1. Author

- a. Main Author – Enslaved to the Will of His Master – Belonging to His Master
“*Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus*”

Paul references the sacrifice that he is making in serving Christ – currently in prison in Rome – in comparison the favor he is going to ask of Philemon should not be burdensome

- b. Companion / Co-Laborer (not really co-author) – “*and Timothy our brother*”

2. Recipients: Beloved family members in Christ and fellow workers in the gospel ministry

a Main Recipient

“to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker”

No room in the family of God for those who don't enter into the yoke of partnership in the gospel ministry; involves commitment and hard work

b. Associates

1) Apphia – probably the wife of Philemon --

“and to Apphia our sister”

Probably had some household oversight over some of the duties of their slaves

2) Archippus (Perhaps the son of Philemon or prominent preacher)

“and to Archippus our fellow soldier”

c. Overall Local Church

“and to the church in your house”

W.E. Oesterley: Up to the third century we have no certain evidence of the existence of church buildings for the purposes of worship; all references point to private houses for this. In Rome several of the oldest churches appear to have been built on the sites of houses used for Christian worship.

3. Salutation / Benediction

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”

B. (:4-7) EFFECTIVE FAITH SHOWS ITSELF IN PRACTICAL LOVE -- THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER FOR THE EFFECTIVE APPLICATION OF LOVE AND FAITH IN THE LIFE OF PHILEMON

(:4) Introduction: Ongoing Thanksgiving for Philemon

“I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers”

1. (:5) The Distinguishing Brand of Genuine Christianity Should Be the Synergy of
Active Faith and Practical Love

Exemplary Report: Commending Philemon for Consistent Pattern of Love and Faith

a. The Report of Practical Love

“because I hear of your love,”

“toward all the saints”

b. The Report of Active Faith

“and of the faith which you have”

“toward the Lord Jesus”

Genuine faith became visible in the active love which Philemon showed to the saints

G.K. Beale: Paul does not thank Philemon, nor does he thank both Philemon and God; instead, he thanks only God for Philemon's love and faithfulness. This indicates that it is not Philemon's independent, autonomous efforts, even to some small degree, that earned God's grace in his life, but it shows that everything about his Christian life is a result of God's unconditional "*grace*," as evidenced from **verse 3**.

2. (:6) The Dynamic Basis for Practical Love Is Effective Faith that Matures in the Comprehension of Our Union with Jesus Christ

Specific Petition:

- a. Foundation for Love = the common faith in our Lord Jesus Christ
"and I pray that the fellowship of your faith"

David Guzik: It is possible that Paul means the sharing of material things, prompted by faith. The ancient Greek word for sharing is *koinonia*, and sometimes Paul used *koinonia*, which means "*fellowship, sharing*," to describe giving (**2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Romans 15:6**).

- b. Functioning of Faith = the maturing and exercise of that faith
"may become effective"
- c. Fruit of Spiritual Knowledge = comprehending and applying the truth of our precious union with Jesus Christ
"through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you"
- d. Focus of Our Faith and Love = ministering to others so that Christ would be exalted
"for Christ's sake."

For Philemon to forgive his offending slave would be a demonstration of the sharing of life spiritually within the family of believers – a demonstration of true fellowship and effective faith.

3. (:7) The Defining Barometer of Effective Faith Should Be the Practical Expression of Love Towards the Saints

- a. The Encouragement of Love to the Apostle Paul
"For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love,"
- b. The Encouragement of Love to the Saints
"because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother."

Refreshed in every way: spiritually, financially, physically

Thomas Constable: Paul felt much joy and comfort as he heard of Philemon's love. The Greek word translated "*hearts*" (*splagchna*) designates total personality at the deepest level. Philemon had already demonstrated the kind of behavior that Paul was going to

call on him to manifest again. Paul's request would test his response. However, Paul was confident of Philemon's cooperation.

II. (:8-16) APPEAL FOR FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION -- BROKEN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS CAN BE TRANSFORMED BY OUR NEW FAMILY RELATIONSHIP IN CHRIST

5 PRIORITIES ENCOURAGING A SPIRIT OF RECONCILIATION AMONG BELIEVERS IN BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

Paul gives a whole bunch of reasons why Philemon should receive Onesimus back:

A. (:8-9) PURSUE AGAPE LOVE -- FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE APOSTLE PAUL

1. (:8) Tone of Appealing Rather than Commanding

"Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper . . . I rather appeal to you" (same verb in **vs. 10**)

Reconciliation constitutes what is proper

2. (:9a) Theme of Agape Love

"yet for love's sake"

This is the point of emphasis in this section

3. (:9b) Testimony of Paul's Example – Playing the Sympathy Card

a. Wisdom of Spiritual Experience

"since I am such a person as Paul, the aged,"

John MacArthur: More than a reference to his chronological age (which at the time of this letter was about 60), this description includes the toll that all the years of persecution, illnesses, imprisonments, difficult journeys, and constant concern for the churches had taken on Paul making him feel and appear even older than he actually was. . . **Acts 28** says he was a prisoner in a rented house, he has people coming and going, he's chained probably to a Roman soldier. And he's saying, "Philemon, can you dare refuse a request from poor old me?"

b. Sacrifice of Committed Service

"and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus"

B. (:10-11) PUT AWAY FORMER PREJUDICES

3 Dramatic Changes need to be recognized in the life of Onesimus:

1. (:10a) Change in Favored Status – Now a Protégé of the Beloved Apostle

"I appeal to you for my child Onesimus,"

2. (:10b) Change in Family Identity – Now a Child of God

"whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,"

3. (:11) Change in Functional Value – Now Useful – play on words

“who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.”

What is more important to you? Hanging on to your old prejudices in terms of how you view the potential of this person or giving the other person the benefit of the doubt regarding his repentance and commitment to following Christ?

C. (:12-14) PROMOTE GOSPEL MINISTRY PARTNERSHIP

1. (:12-13a) Valuable to Paul for Gospel Ministry

“I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me,”

2. (:13b) Valuable to Philemon for as an Extension of His Gospel Ministry

“so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;”

3. (:14) Voluntary Requirement of this Gospel Ministry Partnership = Your Goodness

“but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. “

D. (:15) PONDER GOD’S PROVIDENTIAL WORKING

Focus on the Eternal over the Temporal

“For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever;”

Illustration of Divine Providence:

Kevin Higgins: As I thought about the mysteries of how God works, I was reminded of a story I heard a few years ago. The story begins with a poor Scottish farmer by the name of Fleming.

One day, while trying to scratch out a living for his family, he heard a cry for help coming from a nearby bog. He dropped his tools and ran to the bog. There, mired to his waist in black muck, was a terrified boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Farmer Fleming saved the lad from what could have been a slow and terrifying death.

The next day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman’s sparse surroundings. An elegantly dressed nobleman stepped out and introduced himself as the father of the boy Farmer Fleming had saved. "I want to repay you," said the nobleman. "You saved my son’s life."

"No, I can’t accept payment for what I did," the Scottish farmer replied, waving off the offer. At that moment, the farmer’s own son came to the door of the family hovel.

"Is that your son?" the nobleman asked.

"Yes," the farmer replied proudly.

"I'll make you a deal. Let me take him and give him a good education. If the lad is anything like his father, he'll grow to a man you can be proud of." And that he did. In time, Farmer Fleming's son graduated from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London, and went on to become known throughout the world as the noted Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin.

Years afterward, the nobleman's son was stricken with pneumonia. It was penicillin that saved the nobleman's son. The name of that nobleman was Lord Randolph Churchill. The son who was saved? Sir Winston Churchill.

We could spend a lifetime trying to figure out how and why God does what He does, but a better use of our time and energy would be to trust that the God who sees the future just as plainly as He sees the past knows better than we do what is good for us. We must trust Him and be obedient, even when we grow uncomfortable or unsure.

In our passage in Philemon tonight, the apostle Paul brings God's providence into the equation. Think about it. Paul travels to Ephesus and leads a man to the Lord. Paul then moves on until years later he is placed in a Roman prison hundreds of miles away. Meanwhile, the man he has led to the Lord has a slave to run away. Of all the places in the world that slave could have gone, he ends up in Rome, where he too hears the gospel of Christ from Paul and experiences a wonderful change of life.

We can't script those sort of events, and yet they happen in our lives all the time. That's one of the reasons Paul was able to write what he did in **Philemon 15**.

"For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever,"

E. (:16) PREFER SPIRITUAL FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Focus on the Spiritual Fellowship over the Household Hierarchy

"no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."

Application:

In Christ, social distinctions cannot determine our spiritual worth or our fundamental relationship to one another.

All converts are equally valuable – earthly class distinctions are eliminated

Gal. 3:28 – all one in Christ Jesus

Ethnic, economic, gender distinctions – all done away with – we see people in a new way;

Look at all we share in Christ – one faith, one baptism, one Spirit, one inheritance ...

Must not be respecters of persons; treat people with dignity based on image of God and His acceptance of us in Christ

The cross changes how we see other people.

Never define someone only by: their job, income, social standing, ethnicity, past criminal record, past addiction or failure in some area, family background, how they once treated you, etc.

The world asks:

- What is your social status?
- What is your income?
- What is your education?
- What have you accomplished?
- What have you done to me?

The gospel asks:

“What has Christ done for you?”

That changes everything.

III. (:17-25) APPLICATION OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION -- THE GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST PROVIDES THE MOTIVATION FOR CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

4 REMINDERS FROM THE GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST THAT MOTIVATE FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

A. (:17-19) GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST REMINDS US OF GREATER DEBTS WE WERE UNABLE TO PAY – VICARIOUS PAYMENT OF ALL WRONGS THAT PAVED THE WAY FOR RECONCILIATION

1. (:17) Reconciliation Requires Gracious Acceptance

“If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.”

2. (:18-19) Reconciliation Requires Gracious Restitution

a. Responsibility for the Wrong

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

b. Repayment of the Wrong

“I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it”

c. Reassessment of the Wrong (in light of former gracious compensation)

“(not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).”

Reminds me of the movie *White Christmas* where the one soldier saves the famous singer from the falling wall and then uses that to obligate the singer – You owe me!

Important to see the analogy between how Paul is stepping up to the plate to secure reconciliation on the basis of assuming the debt owed by Onesimus and the central truths of the gospel message itself. Let’s just briefly mention some of the parallels – since you should be able to very easily preach the gospel to someone from the message of Philemon: **(Bill McRae)**

- Issue of an Offense – Onesimus has stolen from Philemon; we have sinned against God; the offense is not disputed – Forgiveness is not denial of the Offense

- Compassion – Paul appeals in tender tones to Philemon; compassion of Christ for what we face as guilty sinners; Onesimus is a picture of someone who is in need of forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration
- Intercession – Paul intercedes; pleads with Philemon to forgive; intercessory work of Christ on our behalf – pleading to God on our account
- Substitution – Paul says charge it to my account; there must be payment – not just Forgive and Forget; obvious that Onesimus could not supply the payment -- Christ takes our guilt. He bears our judgment. He pays our debt. And His righteousness is credited to us. Paul is therefore doing more than mediating a human disagreement. He is **living out the gospel in front of Philemon**. Christian forgiveness may cost you
- Restoration to favor – elevation to a new position – children of God; members of body of Christ

People who understand the enormous forgiveness they have received from God should become people who are increasingly willing to forgive others.

Matt. 18:21-35 – Peter’s question: *Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?* Jesus advocated for unlimited forgiveness – don’t put a boundary on it – then he gave the story of the man who had been forgiven much and then put the squeeze on those who owed him money

Vs. 32-33 *Then summoning him, his lord said to him, “You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. ³³ Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?”*

B. (:20) GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST REMINDS US OF THE GREAT BLESSINGS OF RECONCILIATION

“Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.”

C. (:21) GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST REMINDS US OF HOW WE SHOULD GO THE EXTRA MILE (BEYOND OBEDIENCE)

1. Encouragement of Faithfulness

“Having confidence in your obedience,”

2. Expression of Obligation

“I write to you,”

3. Expectation of Grace

“since I know that you will do even more than what I say.”

D. (:22) GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST REMINDS US THAT ACCOUNTABILITY IS IMMINENT

1. Be Prepared for the Arrival of Spiritual Authority

“At the same time also prepare me a lodging,”

Paul is going to personally visit and he will be checking up on the situation – how has Philemon responded to his entreaties?

2. Be Praying for the Arrival of Spiritual Authority

“for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.”

Paul has the expectation here of release from his Roman imprisonment. This contrasts with his second imprisonment where he faced certain execution.

(:23-24) CLOSING GREETINGS: (see Col. 4:10-14)

1. Fellow Prisoner

“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,”

2. Fellow Workers

“as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.”

(:25) BENEDICTION: IT’S ALL ABOUT THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

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

Alan Thompson: The concluding verses highlight both the significance of the Lord Jesus as well as the partnership in ministry and commitment to the gospel that belonging to Jesus involves. The emphatic full title, Lord Jesus Christ, highlights Jesus as the sovereign Lord and in this context the source of grace. Thus it is only because of him that Paul, Philemon, Onesimus and all those at Colossae know God. Furthermore, it is his sacrifice for sin that gives shape to the way Paul appeals to Philemon to extend grace and love to Onesimus. The list of names, therefore, conclude the letter as those who belong to the Lord Jesus, are committed to his gospel and who serve together: a fitting conclusion that highlights for Philemon how the gospel of the Lord Jesus is the framework for life.

CONCLUSION:

We are not given the details of how Philemon responded – but I think it is obvious that he forgave Onesimus. Church tradition speaks to Onesimus eventually becoming one of the key leaders in the church at Ephesus as attested to by Ignatius.

REVIEW:

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**II. (:8-16) APPEAL FOR FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION --
BROKEN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS CAN BE TRANSFORMED BY OUR NEW
FAMILY RELATIONSHIP IN CHRIST**

**III. (:17-25) APPLICATION OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION --
THE GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST PROVIDES THE MOTIVATION FOR
CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION**

What is the problem with failing to forgive others? With harboring bitterness or even pursuing personal vengeance?

1. Bitterness POISONS

It contaminates the heart and eventually affects others. -- **Hebrews 12:15**

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;

You end up with a distorted view of life where your thinking is dominated about how you were done wrong. It gives Satan an open door, a foothold to spread cancer in your life.

2. Unforgiveness ENSLAVES

It keeps us emotionally tied to the offense and offender. -- **Ephesians 4:31–32**

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.³² And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Unforgiveness keeps that pain alive. Unforgiveness keeps that sore open. Unforgiveness never lets that wound heal.

3. Vengeance DESTROYS

It perpetuates the cycle of evil and usurps God's role as Judge. -- **Romans 12:19–21**

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.²⁰ "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head."²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

4. Forgiveness FREES

It releases personal vengeance to God and allows us to live in the freedom of Christ's forgiveness. -- **Colossians 3:13**

bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

A memorable summary

Bitterness says, "I will never let you forget what you did."

Forgiveness says, "I will not let what you did control the rest of my life."

And biblically, the ultimate motivation is not simply, **"Forgive because it will make you feel better."**

It is:

"Forgive because God in Christ has forgiven you."

That is the heart of the Christian response to personal offense.

The **importance of forgiveness** is a constant theme of Scripture. There are no less than seventy-five different word pictures about forgiveness in the Bible. They help us grasp the importance, the nature, and the effects of forgiveness.

- To forgive is to turn the key, open the cell door, and let the prisoner walk free.
- To forgive is to write in large letters across a debt, “Nothing owed.”
- To forgive is to pound the gavel in a courtroom and declare, “Not guilty!”
- To forgive is to shoot an arrow so high and so far that it can never be found again.
- To forgive is to bundle up all the garbage and trash and dispose of it, leaving the house clean and fresh.
- To forgive is to loose the moorings of a ship and release it to the open sea.
- To forgive is to grant a full pardon to a condemned criminal.
- To forgive is to relax a stranglehold on a wrestling opponent.
- To forgive is to sandblast a wall of graffiti, leaving it looking like new.
- To forgive is to smash a clay pot into a thousand pieces so it can never be pieced together again.

(John Nieder and Thomas Thompson, *Forgive and Love Again* [Eugene, Oreg.: Harvest House, 1991], p. 48)

This week, ask yourself three questions:

1. **Whom do I need to forgive?**
2. **With whom do I need to pursue reconciliation?**
3. **Whom do I need to begin seeing differently because of what Christ has done?**

Philemon teaches us that **the gospel is not merely something we believe—it is something that changes the way we treat people.**

WHY STUDY THIS BOOK?

- To gain a biblical understanding of relational forgiveness and reconciliation
- To wrestle with how the NT writers treated the social and economic issue of slavery
- To appreciate the detailed working of the providence of God
- To see how Christian brotherhood cuts across all economic classes and diversity of individuals
- To deepen our ethical convictions regarding doing what is right regardless of the unknown consequences
- To see the art of persuasion in operation