



Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church

Jonah • love and forgiveness • philemon 1-22 • 05/06/2018

Main Point

When others treat us wrongly, we are to relate to them with forgiveness. In so doing, we treat others as Jesus treated us.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Ask volunteers to share an experience in which they did something as a child or teenager that their parents did not want them to do. Did their parents find it easy or difficult to forgive them? Explain why.

What makes forgiveness hard in some cases and easier in others?

A variety of things contribute to how easy or difficult it can be to forgive someone who wrongs us. Paul addressed the issue of forgiveness in his letter to Philemon. A slave named Onesimus had run away from his master Philemon and perhaps had even stolen money from him. Paul acknowledged that Philemon had been wronged. Yet, he also challenged Philemon to forgive Onesimus. As we study this text, we do so hoping that God will help us let go of any unforgiving attitudes we may be harboring. To forgive those who mistreat us is not easy, but it is always important, for this is precisely what He did for us in Christ.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| ask a volunteer to read philemon 1-7.

Why did Paul say he was thankful for his friend Philemon?

Paul cited evidence of love and faith in Philemon's life. How are love and faith apparent in your life, both at church and in the community?

What affect was Philemon having on the believers in his church? Who are some Christians in whose presence you are refreshed? What is it that makes these people refreshing to be around?

What might be the opposite of being a person who refreshes others by his or her fellowship? How can we avoid being that person?

Just as Paul had observed Philemon and the positive impact of his service to Christ, people are watching believers today to see if our walk matches our talk. We should seek to have a positive impact on others, refreshing and energizing them in the faith.

| have a volunteer read philemon 8-13.

What does it appear Paul wanted Philemon to do, based on these verses? Why do you think Paul appealed to Philemon on Onesimus' behalf? What was the basis of Paul's appeal to Philemon?

Should our forgiveness of others depend on whether the person deserves our forgiveness? Explain. Is that how God forgives?

Is love something we feel, or something we do? What about forgiveness—is it an emotion or a choice? Explain.

We can offer our forgiveness to others on the basis of love, as we have experienced God's grace. This forgiveness must be given willingly, not under compulsion. As believers, we can grow in love as we do what is right because it's the right thing to do.

| ask a volunteer to read philemon 14-16.

Why did Paul decide to send Onesimus back to Philemon? How might this have turned out if Philemon were unwilling to forgive his runaway slave?

Philemon might have responded skeptically, saying he was not convinced he could trust the slave who had stolen from him and run away. What advice would you have given Philemon?

How do you think Onesimus felt about his upcoming reunion with Philemon?

Why might it have been difficult for Philemon to think of Onesimus as a dearly loved brother?

As Christians, we share with other believers the experience of having been forgiven by God. This transforms the relationships we may have had when we were apart from Christ. We are now related in the family of God and should relate to one another in love.

| have a volunteer read philemon 17-22.

Paul wanted Philemon to think of him as a partner. The Greek word translated “partner” is related to *koinonia*, which means fellowship, in the sense of partnership. It describes one who shares responsibility or experiences with another. Paul referred to Titus as his partner in 2 Corinthians 8:23.

What would it look like if each member of your class considered himself or herself a partner in the ministry of the gospel? What would need to change before that was true?

What benefits are there when we partner with other believers to accomplish the work of Christ?

How does this partnership or fellowship hinge on the forgiveness we extend to one another?

How did Paul want Philemon to accept Onesimus? How did he acknowledge the harm Onesimus’s sin had caused?

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How does your expression of forgiveness picture the grace of Jesus Christ to those around you? How can you do that without calling attention to yourself?

What are you doing to remind yourself of God’s grace to you in Christ? How will you express your gratitude to Christ for His forgiveness?

Pray

In prayer, ask God to help each person recognize and appreciate how great is His grace in forgiving us. Pray for gracious hearts to forgive those who have wronged us, and the ability to accept one another and labor together for the Lord.

Commentary

| philemon 1-22

Verse 1-2. Paul listed Philemon first as the letter’s primary recipient. Paul addressed him as a dear friend (literally, “the beloved”) and coworker—one who labored in Christ’s cause with Paul. Philemon would make the critical decision about Onesimus’s reception and future.

Verse 3. Paul extended his usual prayer for the recipients. The pronoun “you” is plural. Grace is God’s love in action, His unmerited favor. Peace is spiritual soundness under God’s rule. Receiving God’s grace issues in wholeness in relationship with Him. God is the Heavenly Father of people who have placed their faith in Christ. God’s grace and peace come through the Lord (Deity) Jesus (Savior) Christ (Messiah).

Verse 4. Following his usual pattern, Paul expressed thanksgiving. He may have meant that every time Philemon’s name surfaced as he prayed, Paul expressed gratitude for him. A second possibility is that Paul consistently prayed for Philemon, and when he did he always thanked God. The phrase “my God” stressed Paul’s close relationship with God.

Verse 5. The stimulus for Paul’s gratitude for Philemon was the report of Philemon’s love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. If the phrase love and faith applies both to Christ and to all the saints, then faith here has the sense of faithfulness. I think it more likely, however, that faith has reference to Philemon’s commitment to and trust in Christ. The word love likely refers to his determined good will for all other believers. The word saints means “separated ones”—people set apart for God’s service and holy living. It is a synonym for the term Christians.

Verse 6. This verse gives the content of Paul’s prayers for Philemon and lays the groundwork for Paul’s request of him. Onesimus, Philemon’s slave, had run away from Colossae. He well may have stolen something before fleeing (see v. 18). Onesimus journeyed to Rome and met Paul, who led him to become a Christian. Rather than keep Onesimus with him, Paul was sending him back to Philemon. The apostle was sending his letter with Onesimus with an appeal on his behalf.

Paul prayed that Philemon’s participation in the faith might become effective. The Greek word rendered “participation” often is translated “fellowship” and has the sense of partnership in a common enterprise or goal. The term “faith” likely referred again to Philemon’s personal trust in Christ that motivated his love “for all the saints” (v. 5). Paul wanted Philemon to activate his faith-driven generosity on Onesimus’s behalf.

Philemon’s “participation in the faith” concerning Onesimus would spring from Philemon’s knowing every good thing that was in believers for the glory of Christ. The Greek word translated knowing conveys the sense of full, personal knowledge gained through experience. Philemon’s decision and action concerning Onesimus would be affected by Philemon’s understanding of the good qualities of Christian character, one of which is forgiveness.

Likely, the phrase “for the glory of Christ” refers primarily to Philemon’s partnership in the faith becoming effectual. It also may refer to Philemon’s knowing God’s good gifts to the church and acting on the grace of forgiveness. Either way, Philemon’s pardoning Onesimus would glorify Christ, who modeled forgiveness.

Verse 7. Reports of Philemon’s Christian love gave Paul great joy and encouraged him. The apostle was counting on Philemon’s extending that love to Onesimus. Addressing Philemon warmly as a brother in

Christ, Paul commended him for his ministry to the saints (believers). Philemon had refreshed their hearts. The word “refreshed” conveys the idea of enabling others to enjoy temporary rest from labor in order to recover and gather strength. The term “hearts” referred to the seat of emotions and will—the heart, lungs, and liver. Philemon had invigorated other Christians. Paul wanted him to refresh Onesimus’s heart in the same way.

Verse 8. Here Paul began his appeal for Onesimus. The phrase “for this reason” translates a Greek term that means “therefore” and refers to evidences of Philemon’s love and graciousness. Paul could have commanded Philemon to forgive Onesimus. The words “great boldness” in Christ emphasized Paul’s apostolic authority. As Christ’s emissary, Paul spoke and acted in Christ’s authority. He reminded Philemon that he was foregoing his right to demand obedience. The phrase “what is right” referred to Philemon’s accepting Onesimus as a Christian brother.

Verse 9. Instead of making a demand, Paul appealed to (entreated, implored) Philemon on the basis of love (agape, Christian love). Love was a dominant characteristic of Philemon’s life, and Paul wanted him to extend that love to Onesimus.

Verse 10. Paul appealed to Philemon for his (spiritual) son, whom he fathered while in chains. In confinement, Paul had won a new convert to Christ. After establishing his close relationship with the new Christian, Paul gave the convert’s name—Onesimus. We only can imagine Philemon’s shock.

Verse 11. Paul employed an effective wordplay on the name “Onesimus.” The name means “profitable” or “helpful.” As Philemon’s slave, he had not lived up to his name. By running away, he had shown himself to be useless (unprofitable). Christ had transformed Onesimus, however, so that he was useful to both Philemon and Paul.

Verse 12. Although Paul was sending Onesimus home, the letter gives no indication that Onesimus was returning against his will. The phrase a part of myself expresses Paul’s strong emotional tie to Onesimus and is the equivalent of “my heart.”

Verse 13. Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him. Evidently, Onesimus already had rendered valuable assistance to Paul. Again, the apostle stressed his imprisonment was for the gospel—because of his missions ministry. If Onesimus stayed, he could serve Paul in Philemon’s place—on Philemon’s behalf. Paul could have justified keeping Onesimus with him on the grounds that Onesimus really was representing Philemon, who thus was rendering service to Paul.

Verse 14. Paul could have kept Onesimus and merely have informed Philemon that he had done so. He would not make that choice, however, without Philemon’s consent (literally, “mind”). Paul wanted Philemon’s good deed (literally, “kindness”) to be done willingly, not out of duty.

Verse 15. Paul saw the possibility of a positive result from what appeared to be a negative situation. Everything hinged on Philemon's forgiving Onesimus. Onesimus's separation from Philemon for a brief time resulted in the slave's conversion. Now Philemon would get him back permanently in a new relationship—an eternal relationship.

Verse 16. Paul did not direct Philemon to set Onesimus free but opened the door to the possibility. Paul urged Philemon to welcome Onesimus home and—by implication—to forgive him. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus no longer as a slave, but more than a slave. Onesimus had been mere property. Now Philemon was to accept Onesimus as a dearly loved brother—a fellow Christian toward whom Philemon was to extend God's kind of love.

Verse 17. The word “if” has the force of “because.” Paul assumed Philemon considered him as a partner—a co-laborer in Christ's service. The apostle made his direct appeal: He wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus in the same manner as Philemon would receive Paul if he were to visit.

Verses 18-19. Onesimus may have wronged Philemon and owed him something. Onesimus may have stolen money to fund his getaway. Philemon may have entrusted him with money to make purchases. Whatever the case, Onesimus was indebted to Philemon.

Verse 20. The Greek particle rendered “yes” gathers up the entire previous request on behalf of Onesimus. “Brother” was a warm term of Christian relationship. The implication is that if Onesimus and Philemon were Paul's Christian brothers, they also were brothers to each other. The phrase “may I have joy” literally is “may I have profit” and is a play on the name Onesimus (“profitable”).

Verse 21. Paul was convinced of Philemon's obedience to the apostle's request. Paul did not assert his apostolic authority (see vv. 8-9) but instead asked that Philemon graciously grant his request. Paul added his confidence that Philemon would do even more than the apostle asked.

Verse 22. On the surface, Paul merely asked Philemon to prepare lodging in anticipation of a future visit. Underneath may be the implication that Paul well might come and check to see whether Philemon had granted the request for Onesimus. Throughout the letter, Paul gently and tactfully nudged Philemon to do what was right.