

Sermon – Boldly Forgiving

Philemon 1 - 21

Sept 5, 2021 for Woodcrest

These letters are just a very small sample of the many many letters I received 30 years ago, in the Spring of 1991, while in Saudi Arabia, Desert Storm. My wife Lisa wrote almost every day, my daughter Angie wrote often, and I got letters from my mom, my mother-in-law and many from church members. These letters encouraged me, gave me hope and made me feel “cared for and loved.” Never underestimate the power of a personal letter. We’re about to study a very personal letter to Philemon. This letter to Philemon could actually start like this: Dear Joanne, Dear Bill, Dear Ruth, Dear Nancy, Dear Dorie, Dear Marcia, Dear Lloyd, Dear Mary, Dear Russ, Dear Carol. That’s how this letter should start, because this is a letter written to you and

written to me. Oh, sure, its title is Philemon, the head of a house church in Colossae around 61 AD, but, Philemon was so much like you and me. You see, Philemon was wronged, Philemon was stolen from, Philemon was ripped off, Philemon experienced a broken relationship. Philemon's slave Onesimus stole from him and then ran away. So Philemon had every right to be angry. Philemon had every right to seek retribution. Philemon had every lawful right to seek damages, seek payment for stolen goods and seek restitution for the wrongs done. Now do you understand why this is written to you and to me? As we go through life, we are often wronged, ripped off, cheated on, stolen from, and people run away from us, leaving us broken, damaged and distraught. This letter is to you and to me because this letter is about reconciliation. This letter is about forgiveness. This letter is about abundant life.

Now this letter about abundant life is written by the Apostle Paul, but actually, truthfully, earnestly, this letter is written by the Spirit of Christ to you and to me. And, let me tell you, what I'm about to say could change your life dramatically right here and right now. Are you ready for that? For, notice this: In almost every other letter that Paul wrote, he addresses himself as an Apostle of Christ. But, this letter, no, he doesn't. He addresses himself as a "prisoner of Christ." A prisoner of Christ. He calls himself a prisoner of Christ, not a prisoner of the blankety blank Romans. No, Paul is not down and out, Paul is not 'woe is me,' not down in the mouth, not an Eyore. Paul is still representing Christ while in chains. Paul is still an ambassador of Christ from a prison cell. It didn't matter what happened to Paul, he's a prisoner of Christ, a servant of Christ, one who is sent by Christ, used by Christ and considers

being a prisoner of Christ as the highest calling. What about you? What is your highest calling? If your highest calling is following Jesus Christ, loving Jesus Christ, and serving Jesus Christ, then it doesn't matter what happens to you either!!! No matter what tragedy, or life situation you find yourself in, you're a prisoner of Jesus Christ and you can rest in assurance that everything will be OK. So, now in your change of life, consider this a letter to you from the Spirit of Christ, through Paul's chained hands.

So, what's the goal for today? What's the outcome Christ desires from our time in His Holy Word? In other words, why did Jesus Christ write this letter to you and to me? I think it's simply this: If there is just one person in your life whom you need to forgive, then do it. If there is just one person in your life whom you need to forgive, then do it.

Forgive them, let it go, stop holding onto the past wounds, be reconciled and be at peace. Stop holding onto the crud, the cancer, the flesh-eating phenomenon of un-forgiveness. Let this letter from Christ's Spirit radiate that spot in you that is crippling you, killing you and debilitating you. Jesus Christ came to set prisoners free and you and I are prisoners of un-forgiveness, we're prisoners of grudges and we're prisoners of getting even. We're mental and emotional prisoners, locked up tight by our vengeful hearts and attitudes. And, when we're emotional prisoners, it has long term physical effects. **<illustrate it with clenched fists>** Let me illustrate this with you. I'll show you how we're living in this unforgiveness state. Make clenched fists. Clench down as hard as you can. Tighter, tighter, tighter, hold that. Are you doing it as hard as you can? Ok, now, slowly, smoothly, let go of the tension. Do you feel it? Do you feel what

forgiveness feels like? That's our goal for today. So, let us drink deep of this letter and let's allow our emotional prison bars to swing wide open. That's what Christ desires. That's why He wrote this letter from a prison cell in Rome, through his prisoner, Paul.

Ok, with that powerful goal let's study this short letter to you. You can call it, your name. Call it Nancy or Carol or Ruth or Russ or Marcia. I'll call it Philemon. We'll look at: key points in this letter and then our response. **Key points in this letter and then our response.**

First, some key points. In the NIV New Testament there are 62 references to forgive. Not one of these references is in this letter to Philemon, I mean this letter to you. Yet this letter is a powerful appeal to forgive, to reconcile, to restore a relationship,

through faith in Jesus Christ. Let me explain and give you some background info. Paul is the spiritual father of Philemon, for this letter tells us that Paul and Philemon were dear friends, fellow workers and brothers in Christ. There was a strong bond between Paul and Philemon. Philemon came to Christ through Paul's ministry. The letter also tells us that Onesimus became Paul's spiritual son while Paul was in chains. In other words, Paul led Onesimus to Christ while in prison. It refers to Onesimus as Paul's son, as his very heart and as very dear to Paul. So, since Paul is the spiritual father of Philemon and the spiritual father of Onesimus, what does that make Philemon and Onesimus? If Paul is the spiritual father of both Philemon and Onesimus, how are Philemon and Onesimus related? Brothers! These two are brothers in Christ. So the Spirit of Christ is writing this letter through Paul to reconcile a broken

relationship. And, you know what? That's what the Spirit of Christ does. In fact, that's what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross at Calvary. Jesus Christ came to reconcile broken relationships, your broken relationship with God and my broken relationship with God. So, in this particular instance, Christ is writing to ask Philemon to do something counter cultural, to follow in Christ's footsteps – to forgive a grievous act against him. You see, in those days, the penalty for running away as a slave and for stealing from your master could easily be death. This was no petty, nickel candy crime. This crime by Onesimus, this brokenness between Philemon and Onesimus had life and death consequences. So, for you and me, so that we can feel that release of tension in our bodies and live in peace, Christ is writing to us to ask us to do something completely counter cultural. He is asking us to go against the grain of our natural, hold a grudge and get even

tendencies. He is asking us, as a brother or sister in Christ to do even more than he asks. He is asking us to forgive the wounds, the hurts, the cuts, the injuries, the stolen goods, the despair that a brother or sister in Christ caused us. Can you picture in your mind who Christ is writing about in your life? Is this letter to you calling to mind a person or situation that you need to forgive? If so, are you willing to be set free?

How do we respond to this letter to us? Ok, so we realize what Christ is asking us to do through this letter to us. How do we do it? This is a counter cultural request and unnatural in human terms. So, how do we forgive, reconcile, and restore a relationship? I'm glad you asked.

You probably have been wondering why I said that this is the Spirit of Christ writing this letter through

Paul. After all, it does say at the beginning, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother. Well, watch this. Paul is appealing to Philemon for Onesimus. Paul is placing himself between these two brothers and is appealing through love for healing, for forgiveness, for reconciliation. The appeal is through love, not force. Paul said in the letter, “I could be bold and order you to do what you ought, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love.” Paul is seeking forgiveness through love – as an intermediary – exactly like what Jesus Christ did for us. Do you see it? The Spirit of Christ, Jesus Christ himself is bridging the chasm between the Father and you, between the Father and me. Jesus Christ personally reconciles our relationship from the cross, when he says, “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” Father forgive them. Let me pay whatever they owe you. Let me

pay their debts with my blood stained hands. Let me write the full check with my blood from my hands.

This letter says, “I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back....” Friends, Christ wrote this letter to us, for Christ bore in his hands, our very lives. He dripped away his life, drop by drop, to write the promissory note for you and for me. He appealed to our Father in love. He appealed to our Father in a self-giving love that gives itself away, sweat bead by sweat bead, blood drop by blood drop, tear by tear, agonizing cry by agonizing cry. When that sinks in, when that makes an impact on us, when we get that in our deepest emotions, how can we legitimately hold on to grudges, how can we hold on to wrongs, how can we hold on to mistreatments and the like? How can we not be permanently changed when our Savior said from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know

what they are doing?” Father forgive them! How can we? How can we? How can we hold on to petty grudges and hurts in our lives? So, remember the goal? **<make a tight fist again>** If there is just one person in your life whom you need to forgive, then do it. Forgive them, let it go, be reconciled and be at peace. Forgive them, let it go, be reconciled and be at peace. This letter to you is signed in the blood, from the nail-pierced hand of our Savior Jesus Christ. **<ok, release the tension in your hand and feel the peace of bold forgiveness>**

One more thing. And, now my friends, there’s a small sub goal, a little opportunity for an extra credit piece here. If you are able to thank your spiritual father or mother, the one(s) who brought you up in the faith or the one(s) who led you to this wonderful life in Christ, do it. Call them today, email them today, text them today or write to them today and

thank them for your abundant and eternal life in
Jesus Christ. Thank-you mom for life and for eternal
life! I love you! Amen.