

Forgiveness is Foundational

Opener: When has forgiveness impacted your life most (other than at salvation) and why?

Scripture: Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker . . . ⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. ⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.

¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. Philemon (condensed)

Discussion Questions

1. Paul's letter to Philemon addresses the issue of a runaway slave, Onesimus, who had become a Christian and close companion to Paul while he was in prison in Rome. Paul appeals to Philemon to accept Onesimus back into his household as a Christian brother, and to forgive him for running away and stealing. Why was it important for Onesimus and Philemon to be reconciled? Why is right relationship with other believers important to us as well?
2. How do you see God sovereignly positioning Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus to bring about forgiveness, reconciliation, and support for Paul?
3. What does Paul's approach illustrate about the wise use of authority? Philemon 8-9
4. Why did Paul send Onesimus back to Philemon? Was it easy to do? What was he putting on the line? What experiences have you had with trying to help other believers reconcile? How did it turn out?
5. Why would God ask us to forgive someone who has hurt us or others? How does forgiveness seem to reward those who've hurt us? If forgiveness lets someone off the hook, why shouldn't we hold onto unforgiveness? Did Onesimus deserve forgiveness? What does this reveal about forgiveness?
6. How do you see the Gospel acted out in this story? How would restoration forever change the relationship Onesimus and Philemon had before Onesimus ran away? What's Christlike about Paul's offer to repay whatever Onesimus owed? Philemon 15-20

Wrap Up: Jesus forgave. There's nothing more stunning than His forgiveness. What could be more loving than forgiving sin? The mistreatments and injustices piled against us may seem unforgivable, but when we look at Jesus, we know there's nothing we can't forgive. Of course, some things are horrific and don't deserve forgiveness. But in the face of Jesus' love, where else is there to land? His love is bigger than our anger, fear, and resentment. It's why He came, it's why He died, it's why He stays with us, even when we've done our best to run Him off. We can choose love over unforgiveness. With Jesus in our hearts, we literally have it in us. Adapted from *Jesus Over Everything*, by Lisa Whittle