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FIXING WHAT'S BROKEN

A STUDY OF PHILEMON



SMALL GROUP LESSONS

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A STUDY OF PHILEMON



The DNA of Biblical Forgiveness

INTRODUCTION

Philemon 1-7

We are beginning a series on forgiveness and reconciliation. This series comes from one of the shortest books of the Bible: the book of Philemon. It is only 25 verses long. You could read this passage of Scripture before I finish this introduction. Yet, for what it lacks in words, it packs a powerful punch. It discusses something that all of us could use some leadership and guidance on: the idea of forgiveness and reconciliation in our relationships with one another and our relationships with God.

This letter is all about a slave named Onesimus who was owned by Philemon. We don't know how many slaves Philemon may have had, but we know Onesimus was there. At some point during his time working under Philemon, Onesimus stole from Philemon. We don't know if it was goods or money, but it was something of great value. He ran away to Rome, a city with a population of nearly one million inhabitants. Rome was a place where fugitives went to disappear.

And whom did he come into contact with? The Apostle Paul. We're not sure where they met or how they met, but he encountered the gospel of Jesus Christ under the teaching of the Apostle Paul. They began a relationship with one another. At some point Paul said, "Hey, wait a minute, you're from Colossae? You're from Philemon's household? I know Philemon. I know the church at Colossae. I know the church that meets in your house. I know who you're running away from." So Paul wrote a letter to Philemon, reporting that he knew where Onesimus ended up. Paul then encouraged Onesimus to return to Philemon's home, not to become a slave again but an equal and a brother in Christ—as the Scriptures will tell us later in this letter. Philemon's job was to forgive the debt that was owed and to allow Onesimus to come back and receive brotherly Christian love, not retaliation.

As we look at this book, we need to recognize that forgiveness and reconciliation is one of the hardest things to do. We love it when people ask for our forgiveness and we love for forgiveness to be shown to us. Yet, we have a difficult time asking for and seeking reconciliation with that forgiveness. It's also difficult to demonstrate forgiveness to those around us. One of the major contributors to the destruction of our relationships is unforgiveness. Instead of living lives of tranquility, we thrive on retaliation. As a result, people are filled with rage and bitterness, unwilling to let go of wrongs done years ago. This makes saying "I'm sorry" taboo.

In this study, we're going to explore what it means to forgive and how it should look. As we begin, let's look at forgiveness and reconciliation as a whole. At the end of this lesson, we will come back and deal with verses four through seven. But first, we need to understand what the biblical DNA of forgiveness looks like.

BREAK THE ICE

1. If fortune cookies offered advice on forgiveness, what cryptic message would you put inside a cookie?

READ IT

Read Philemon 1-7

EXPLORE IT

2. What does Paul thank God for in Philemon?
3. What is Paul's prayer for Philemon?
4. What gives Paul much joy and comfort?

APPLY IT

It doesn't matter what gender you are. It doesn't matter how much you have in your bank account. It doesn't matter how old you are. It doesn't matter what kind of personality you have. I guarantee that sometime this week you will be hurt by someone else. You will be offended. It may come from your spouse or a family member. It may come from a co-worker or a neighbor. It may come from someone you've never met before. I can guarantee you that sometime this week, you will be offended.

Here's why: the Bible tells us that this world is full of sinners. And what do sinners do? Sinners are selfish. Sinners backstab. Sinners are evil people. You're a bunch of sinners and I'm a sinner. Because we have to live in this world as a group of sinners, we will inevitably hurt one another in ways we are ignorant of.

5. Describe a time that you hurt or offended someone and needed to be forgiven.

6. Describe a time that you've been hurt or offended by someone and needed to extend forgiveness.

When we harbor hurts, unforgiveness brings disruption into our lives. What happens when we push those hurts and feelings down? There are four results to unforgiveness in our lives:

- Unforgiveness chains you and others to the past
- Unforgiveness causes bitterness to invade your life
- Unforgiveness creates an open door for the devil
- Unforgiveness culminates in a strained relationship with God

7. How does Hebrews 12:15 speak to the importance of not allowing a "root of bitterness" to grow in our hearts, and what steps can we take to prevent this?

8. Consider the following passages. What do they convey about a biblical approach to addressing hurt, forgiveness and working toward reconciliation?

Ephesians 4:26-27

1 Corinthians 13:6

Genesis 4:7

9. How can our unforgiveness toward other people strain our relationship with God?

10. If these four results of unforgiveness are valid, why do you think we are so prone to harboring resentment and unforgiveness in our hearts?

The Bible doesn't just define forgiveness for us; it chronicles how God demonstrates forgiveness. The gospel is a picture of how God demonstrates this forgiveness for us. Romans 5:8 reminds us what forgiveness looks like. It's merciful. God demonstrates His love for us in that while you and I were still sinners, while we were shaking our fists at God, while we were making obscene gestures at God in our humanity, God demonstrates forgiveness to us through His love by sending His Son Jesus to die on our behalf. "While we were still sinners Christ died for us." That's how Jesus forgives.

Forgiveness is given to the offender who does not deserve it. Forgiveness is given with compassion and grace. That same forgiveness is given each and every time you and I trample the cross of Jesus Christ when we choose sin over holiness. "[God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

11. How do the following passages describe God's forgiveness of our sins?

Micah 7:19

Psalm 103:12

Isaiah 43:25

Hebrews 8:12

12. Consider Jesus' parable in Matthew 18:23-35. How does understanding God's forgiveness towards us influence our ability to forgive others?

13. In 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 Paul says that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. How do you think our reconciliation with others impacts our faithfulness to the ministry of reconciliation God has entrusted to us?

In Philemon 4-6, Paul tells us that Philemon has a strong faith, one that is actively and consistently seeking to honor God in all ways. He was a person who sought to refresh others. Paul says to him, "You have been refreshing to me. The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you." As people walked around and were part of your life last week, could they say, "This person was a refreshment to me, a cup of cold water on a hot, dry day"? One way that you can refresh the souls of those around you is to forgive them and tell them that.

As we begin to embark on this journey through Philemon, let us default to refreshing others by forgiving them the wrongs they have done. Alexander Pope was right when he said, "To err is human but to forgive is divine."

14. In what ways does forgiving others lead to refreshing and renewing our relationships, as suggested by the life of Philemon (Philemon 1:7)? Share personal experiences where forgiveness has led to a sense of renewal.

15. The quote from Alexander Pope above views forgiveness as something that God does that flows from the nature of who God is – “forgiveness is divine”. How can this understanding encourage us to forgive others more freely?

16. Take a minute to meditate on Ephesians 4:31-32. How closely are your current attitudes and actions towards others reflecting what these verses call you to? Is there anything in particular in these verses that you need to bring before the Lord?

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Love's Appeal

INTRODUCTION

Philemon 8-16

In our text here, Paul is pleading for his friend Philemon, a mature follower of God, to make a wise decision. Paul is telling Philemon, and us today, that we need to choose forgiveness. We need to make that choice no matter how difficult that choice may be. Now I know many of us today would right away say from our cushy pews at Village Bible Church, "I choose forgiveness." But let me remind you the sting of those things that are offensive to us; the things that hit us out of nowhere; the things we never saw coming our way that have caused us great pain and suffering from the hands of another. You see, we more often than not are not choosing forgiveness and reconciliation but by default we choose revenge and retaliation. Oh, we do it passively; we do it aggressively; but in the end whether we're passive about it or aggressive about it, we get our pound of flesh.

Paul says for the Christian, it is option number two always—no matter how difficult or hard the road may be. It may cause you as a Christian to look foolish and naïve; it may mean that you have to minister to those who have hurt you. But Paul says it's the right thing to do; it's the biblical thing to do. Forgiveness shows the world and our Father in heaven that you and I truly understand the forgiveness God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

But how do we do it? We get it. We've got to do it: forgive as Christ has forgiven us.

We've got to do it. But how?

BREAK THE ICE

1. If you were to wake up tomorrow with a random new skill, what would you most hope it would be and why?

READ IT

Read Philemon 8-16

EXPLORE IT

2. How does Paul choose to approach this situation between Philemon and Onesimus?
3. How does Paul refer to Onesimus?
4. Why does Paul send Onesimus back to Philemon?
5. What is Paul's hope for the future relationship between Onesimus and Philemon?

APPLY IT

Philemon has shown himself to be faithful in loving people but notice, God doesn't give curves to His grading system. No, the model of perfection is Jesus. Philemon has a problem because Philemon loves people who are easy to love, but Paul's going to say, "But what about Onesimus, that guy who has wronged you? That guy who has taken stuff from you? That guy who made you look stupid?

That guy who caused you not to trust people anymore?
The one who took your stuff and ran.
Are you going to love him?"

You see, Jesus reminds us we are not to just love the easy ones. It wasn't hard for Jesus to love the children who came to Him. "Don't let the children be kept from Me. I just want to love on them" (Matthew 19:13-15). Jesus loved those who were easily lovable. But we notice that Jesus also loved the unlovable—the leper, the prostitute. He loved those who were defiled and broken, who were thrown away by cultural standards. Jesus loved them and filled with compassion, He loved the unlovable.

Let's take it even farther. When they're nailing Jesus' hands and feet onto the cross, Jesus is uttering words of love when He says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

It's easy to love the lovable, but can you love those who, from an earthly standpoint, may seem impossible to love? Paul says, "I know you're doing a good job but doing a good job serving the easy, lovable people isn't the mark of Christianity, but loving and praying for your enemies is."

6. What are some things that could make people difficult to love?

How well do you do at "loving the unlovable"?

What is one way you can grow in your love toward these people this week?

7. According to 1 Corinthians 13:1-7, where do you see forgiveness and reconciliation as an outworking of genuine love for others?

8. How might our understanding of genuine love for others influence our willingness and eagerness to extend genuine forgiveness to others?

Are we called, commanded, told to forgive? Yes. Over and over again it is commanded. Jesus doesn't suggest it. Paul doesn't say, "Hey, if you've got some time on your hands, go ahead and forgive." No. You need to forgive. It's a command. It's a calling. But notice what Paul says in verse eight, "Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required..." In other words, "You've got to forgive, Philemon. That's what Christians do." Paul says that's not the way to get to a heart of forgiveness. Why? "Philemon, you don't need to just forgive because the Bible tells you so. You don't need to just forgive because that's what good Christians do. You don't need to just forgive because a Christian's duty is to forgive. You need to forgive out of a heart of love."

9. Paul's appeal to Philemon is highlighted as an act done out of love, not obligation. How can we ensure that our forgiveness is genuine and comes from a place of love rather than duty?

- 10. Discuss the challenges and internal struggles we might face when choosing forgiveness over retaliation. How does Romans 12:19, which commands us not to take revenge but leave room for God's wrath, guide us in these situations?**

How do we forgive when those feelings are so raw and wounds are so deep? We do so when we make a conscious decision that people are able to change. People don't remain the same. Think for a moment of all the dumb things you've done in your life, especially when you were younger. Did you stay there? No. You grew up. You matured; you wised up. I understand that it's hard for many of us to get beyond the pain of being wronged but we must be willing to acknowledge the truth that people can change.

Here's the thing: I'm preaching to the choir about this because if anybody is going to understand that people can change it's Christians. My goodness, as a church we sing and pray; we preach about affirming and endorsing a faith that makes old things new, sinful things holy and foolish things wise. The very words that we're devoting this preaching series to are the words of a man who hunted down Christians and sought to destroy the name of Christ during his young adult life. But he changed.

We're willing to give Paul the benefit of the doubt that he changed, but are we willing to give the benefit of the doubt to those who have wronged us as well? Even if it's just small changes?

- 11. As seen in the transformation of Onesimus, people can and do change. How does this belief in change impact our willingness to forgive? Explore the implications of 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Ephesians 4:17-24, which talk about Christ's transforming work in our lives.**

Even though from an earthly standpoint I can't tie that thing up into a big bow and make it all right, here's what I do know: God does sometimes allow people to offend or hurt you, or someone you love, for a greater good. I don't have time to get into this story but Joseph was harassed and hurt by his brothers. They did the unthinkable. Genesis 48–50 tells the story. They ruined his life. They did not say they were sorry until after the fact, at the very end when their fannies were on the line. He had been wronged. He had been hurt. He was sold into slavery. He was put in prison. His father had been told he was dead. They traded him in. I mean that's a pretty big offense. It's certainly more than your standard issue offense on a Sunday morning, right? Joseph reminds us of a hard but incredible truth: what man intends for harm God uses for good (Genesis 50:20).

Maybe you've got an offense in your life that you can't give up to forgive. You say, "It's too hard. The person isn't here to say they're sorry. I've got to tie this thing up in a bow. I've got to be able to release this thing. There's no answer and until I have an answer I'm not going to forgive." Here's your answer in those moments: what men, or women, intended for your harm God has an intent or use for good. Your pain and hurt might be given to you so that others might be blessed through it. Have you ever thought about that? Paul says that you can comfort others because you yourself have been comforted in your hour of need; that you might strengthen others, you might encourage others (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

12. How can embracing God's sovereignty help us in our journey towards forgiving others, even when it feels undeserved?

13. How can suffering and adversity (even at the hands of others) bring us closer to God, and why is it crucial to forgive as part of our spiritual growth?

14. Forgiveness can be challenging when the offending party is absent or unrepentant. How can we find the strength to forgive in these situations, and why is it important for our spiritual growth?

15. How can we find the strength to forgive in circumstances where we have not, and may never, receive an apology? What does this demonstrate about our understanding of God's grace and mercy toward us?

16. Reconciliation can be a delicate process, especially when an apology may not be forthcoming. How are forgiveness and reconciliation different from each other?

How are forgiveness and reconciliation intricately related to one another?

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What Hat You Wearin'?

INTRODUCTION

Philemon 17-25

This short letter wedged between Titus and Hebrews centers around Philemon, a Christian leader, and Onesimus, his runaway slave. Paul writes this compelling letter urging Philemon to not only forgive Onesimus but to welcome him back as a brother in Christ.

The beauty of this letter lies in the fact that it goes beyond Philemon and Onesimus. It offers a blueprint for how all Christians can navigate forgiveness and reconciliation in our own lives. Think about it: We've all been wronged at some point. We've also likely hurt others ourselves. So, throughout this lesson, let's explore the different hats we wear in this process:

The Philemon: Sometimes, we're the ones who've been deeply injured. We have a right to feel anger, resentment, or even a desire for revenge. But how do we move from those feelings to forgiveness?

The Onesimus: We've all messed up. Maybe we've betrayed a friend's trust, broken a promise, or caused someone pain. This passage helps us understand the importance of taking responsibility, seeking forgiveness, and genuinely desiring to make things right.

The Paul: Perhaps you've found yourself in a situation where you can act as a bridge between two people seeking reconciliation. What qualities does Paul display that can guide us in offering support and fostering healing?

BREAK THE ICE

1. If your life had a soundtrack, what are 3 songs that would definitely be on it?

READ IT

Read Philemon 17-25

EXPLORE IT

2. How does Paul urge Philemon to receive Onesimus?
3. What does Paul offer as he mediates this reconciliation process?
4. What is Paul confident Philemon will do?

APPLY IT

The Philemon

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."

5. The process of receiving back a person who has wronged you may look different considering the wrong that has been committed. What steps should "the Philemon" take to work toward receiving someone back?

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."

6. As a "Philemon" what might it reveal in us if instead of hoping to see someone who has wronged us succeed in changing and pursuing reconciliation, we are actually hoping they fail?

7. How can we move from a place of seeking reconciliation by compulsion to a place of seeking reconciliation cheerfully? How might Paul's words in Colossians 3:12-14 help guide us in this process?

The Onesimus

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.

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.

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.

8. What steps can an offender take to demonstrate genuine repentance?

9. What does Leviticus 6:2-5 reveal to us about God’s ideal in making things right when we’ve wronged someone?

10. How does Psalm 51 help us understand the heart of repentance before God when we can't fully undo the wrong we've done?

11. What kind of character is necessary to genuinely seek forgiveness and reconciliation when we find ourselves wearing the hat of an "Onesimus" when we've wronged someone else?

The Paul

There's still one other hat represented in this letter – "The Paul". While most of the time we may find ourselves putting on the hat of the Philemon or the Onesimus, there are times where we may find ourselves playing the part of Paul, a mediator between the Philemon and the Onesimus – the offended and the offender.

12. How do you know if it's your place to step in and help mediate a conflict between other people?

13. What challenges might we experience in mediating conflict between others?

14. What are some of the key strategies and qualities employed by Paul as he mediated this conflict between Philemon and Onesimus?

15. What are some practical ways that we as Christians should support and encourage one another in the pursuit and process of forgiveness and reconciliation?

Philemon and the Gospel

In the end, brothers and sisters, Philemon is a picture of the gospel. The offender. The offended. The mediator. This letter isn't meant to stir the pot of 1st century gossip and refuse to let old grievances die. Instead, it's given to us as an example of how the transforming power of the gospel works itself out not only in our vertical relationship with God, but in our horizontal relationships with one another.

16. As you look over this letter as a whole, describe how this situation acts as a picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

17. How does your understanding of the gospel change how you will approach forgiveness and reconciliation in the future?