

## To Forgive and to Be Forgiven 1

As the theme of my message, *To Forgive and to Be Forgiven*, is very big and very important, I would like to talk about it in a couple of installments.

### 1. Introduction

I would like to begin with reading today's scriptures. Philemon is a letter which consists of only one chapter and is one of the shortest books in the Bible, but I believe there is something deep we can learn in it. Let us read the first half of the letter, vv.1-9.

#### Philemon 1:1-9

Paul wrote lots of letters to teach, encourage and scold churches and Christians in his time. There are 13 letters Paul wrote in New Testament, but they say he wrote a lot more letters than that. Among the letters he wrote, some were ones a lot of people read in circulation, such as the book of Romans written to Jewish believers in Rome, and others were ones to Timothy and Titus, which taught them how to manage churches.

The author is certainly Paul, and Paul's brother in Christ, Timothy, is a co-author. This letter was addressed to Philemon. Paul seems to have been very selective of the words he used to address his letters. In this letter, Paul called Philemon "our ... fellow worker," which implies a relationship between them as allies who share a purpose and friendship. Also he called him, "our dear friend," which shows Philemon was somebody Paul loved as a friend and a Christian brother. They must have had a very close relationship.

However, verse 8 has a different tone in its expression. Let's read it again.

#### Philemon 1:8

What do you think? If you just read this verse, its connotation is very oppressive. "...I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do." It implies a master-servant relationship.

One of the things we should be careful about on reading the Bible is that we need to understand the historical background of it. I talked about slavery a little last year, but it's probably safe to say that we don't have any slavery in this world, except for some nations under abnormal dictatorship. However, in New Testament days, slavery was very common; one third of the Roman population was said to be slaves in the Roman Empire. Or some say that the slavery population was three times more than that of the Roman citizens. There were lots of slaves in towns, and in every house there were slaves. In this kind of era, a relationship between a master and a slave was, of course, an absolute master-servant relationship. In our world of democracy and established basic human rights, it's not easy to imagine that slaves were demanded absolute obedience in the era this letter was written.

While Paul calls Philemon a "dear...fellow worker," he also uses an oppressive expression. We can see that

Philemon was a fellow worker who was dear to him in Christ but also somebody who would follow Paul's orders.

Verse 2 shows us that this letter was also sent to "Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home." They say Apphia might have been Philemon's wife and Archippus his child. Philemon must have opened his home to fellow believers and worshipped God with them.

Verses 3-7 tell us Philemon, his family and his home church sustained abundant and blessed faith in God. We are not going to discuss this point any further today, but when Paul wrote letters, addressees usually had some troubles, and he wrote to scold them. However, Philemon and his environment appear to have been in very good condition faith wise.

From these verses we have learned so far:

- To Paul, Philemon was a dear fellow worker.
- Paul was in a relationship where he could order Philemon to do anything.
- Philemon and his family were in a blessed, abundant environment.

As we see that the letter to Philemon has only one chapter of 25 verses, and one third of this short letter is greetings to Philemon. It must have been done out of Paul's thoughtfulness and observation. Then where did his thoughtfulness and observation come from?

Read Philemon 1:8-12

The letter to Philemon was of course written to Philemon, but it's about Onesimus. Paul wrote, "...Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.....I am sending him.....back to you." If Onesimus hadn't had any relationship with Philemon in the past, this would have been simply Paul sending one of believers to Philemon, but Onesimus had a serious problem with Philemon: Onesimus was once Philemon's slave and fled from him.

In the society of this time, slaves were treated very badly. Peter tells that to us in 1 Peter 2:18-19.

Read 1 Peter 2:18-19

There were good and considerate masters and also harsh ones. Harsh ones would cause "the pain of unjust suffering..." We may not think twice about this part of the Bible, not knowing much about slavery, but if there were anybody who was a slave here, it wouldn't be something which could be taken lightly.

According to a research paper of an emeritus professor of Tokyo Christian University, Akiko Minato, the Roman slavery system peaked in the latter half of the 2nd century B.C. and its population was one third of that of the empire. It was impossible for them to escape from the slavery, and even if they were successful in the attempt, they became victims of thieves, or in case of unsuccessful attempts, they were executed in the

Colosseum, crucified or met with more brutal executions. In any way, they couldn't possibly escape successfully. But Onesimus escaped from Philemon. Onesimus, too, was probably caught and thrown into a prison where he met Paul.

Why did they have to be executed when they got caught? One of the reasons was probably controlling slaves by fear. Being a slave is never comfortable. If you have a harsh master, it must have been a living hell. You could never resist what was ordered of you and were required absolute obedience. It is easy to guess they must have wanted to escape in every chance they got in this kind of living situation. It must have been necessary to show what happens to a slave who ever attempts to escape in order to sustain the slavery system.

Under this kind of slavery system, Paul is asking Philemon to accept Onesimus. Even more, Paul is demanding that "...in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do," to make sure Philemon couldn't refuse his request.

You might think Paul is terrible in doing this. However, when we consider where he was coming from, we see that this is not only a private letter to Philemon but a very important letter which teaches every believer or every human being who would live after Paul's passing about importance of forgiveness. Let us consider how that is.

## **2. Forgiveness requires preparation**

To Philemon, forgiving Onesimus for escaping was dependent on him, so time might have solved it no matter how upset he was at that time, although we don't know how long it had been since Onesimus' escaped. But the biggest problem was the slavery system and its punishment for escapees; he had to punish him severely, and it was required of him to maintain the system. If Philemon didn't punish Onesimus, how would all the other slaves react? They would think that under Philemon they would get away with escaping! Philemon would not only be unable to control his slaves but also could throw the entire slavery system into chaos! Philemon, too, may have to be punished for acting against the slavery system by not only other masters but by the government!

Paul asked him to accept and forgive Onesimus. This was not only a private matter for Philemon, but also a challenge to the slavery system. Paul understood that even if Philemon wanted to forgive Onesimus personally, the situation in the society would never allow it. Therefore, Paul must have asked Philemon to emotionally forgive Onesimus and accept the consequences with preparation.

To us it's not a small matter to accept and forgive something emotionally, but consequences by accepting and forgiving might even be a bigger matter. The Parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15 also tells us about this father's preparation for the consequences of forgiveness. In fact, the father had already forgiven the younger son when he left, and he gave him everything he kept for him after he returned. Although he didn't know if the younger son would return or how other family members would react to it, he prepared things for him

and even threw a party for him when he returned which upset his older son and may have caused a relationship to deteriorate between the father and the older son. However, he accepted and forgave his younger son. This father must have prepared for the consequences.

### **3. Forgiveness is God's order**

Read Luke 17:3-4

Jesus orders his disciples, "If they repent, forgive them."

Paul tells in Philemon 1:11 that Onesimus "has become useful" by receiving God's forgiveness and reconciliation with God after Paul scolded him and Onesimus accepted his own sin and repented. To Philemon, Onesimus was a slave who sinned against him. Although Paul can be bold and order him to do what he ought to do, he didn't order him to forgive Onesimus. He said in Philemon 1:14 that "any favor...would be voluntary." Philemon had to decide if he would forgive Onesimus.

Then what would be a reason for Philemon to voluntarily forgive Onesimus? If he didn't have any reason to do so, it would be just because Paul ordered him to do so.

This is not all about Philemon. How about us? How would we forgive somebody who affects our relationship directly? What would it take to forgive somebody who sinned against us or did something so unethical and unforgivable?

One of the reasons we would forgive somebody may be believing that s/he wouldn't do the same thing again. Since we are only human, we may fail, and it's impossible to say "never again," but if s/he promises so, we may be able to forgive. However, Jesus said, "Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." Not "never again," but Jesus says "forgive seven times!"

What does it mean to forgive seven times in a day? It probably means "forgive every time and any time." No matter how many times or how huge it is socially, just forgive. It would be very convenient for a person who is forgiven, but it would be quite challenging for a person who forgives. Why would we forgive every time and anytime? God's forgiveness is that kind of unlimited forgiveness, that's why. What did God's forgiveness give us? Eternal life in God and God's love. Even if we didn't feel God's eternal life and love, God's forgiveness keeps giving them to us. If we can forgive others without condition, we can feel God's life and love. Why did God order us to forgive without any condition? God forgave us without any condition, that's why.

Paul is exactly the one who knew about God's life and love more than anybody else, and he confesses it in 1 Timothy 1:15-17.

Read 1 Timothy 1:15-17

Paul knew that it would be a perfect opportunity for Philemon to feel God's life and love by forgiving and accepting Onesimus. That's probably why Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. It would have been better to keep Onesimus with him, if Paul just wanted to not cause any further trouble. But Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon for Philemon's sake. And forgiving Onesimus was God's order for Philemon. This God's order wasn't some order given by a master to a slave, but the order for Philemon to feel God's eternal life and love.

#### **4. To forgive is to have (us) back forever**

In closing, let us read Philemon 1:15

Paul said, "You might have him back forever," by forgiving. We may wonder what's so good for Philemon to forgive Onesimus who escaped once and who nobody knows would be any good as a slave any more. Would having Onesimus back forever cancel out all the negatives for Philemon?

Through this, though, we should remember how God had us back forever when we didn't deserve God's forgiveness. We are even less worthy to God than Onesimus to Philemon. But God forgave us and accepted us. Why did God do that for us? We wouldn't know the answer, but we know God loves us. God's love realized this unexplainable and unbelievable salvation. When we believe God and accept His salvation, God will have us back forever.

If you haven't accepted God's salvation yet, please consider accepting it today. God declared to forgive everything to have you back forever. If you repent, everything will be forgiven. This is God's promise to you.

Let us pray.