

# Love for Prodigal Partners Philemon (Part 2)

- Introduction

- God's grace truly is amazing, is it not?
- Last week we sang of how God's grace is such a profound mystery
- Today, we proclaim the amazing riches of the grace that saves running rebel like you and me
- And it is that same grace that empowers us to love others in the household of faith (focus this morning)
  - Open to Philemon
  - **Bibles made available**
- Blessing of God's written word
- Apart from it, I have nothing worth telling you this morning, do you realize this?
- Don't come for a motivational speech or pep talk
- No, when we gather, we gather to hear God's word to us
  - **Stand, read, pray**

- Have you ever struggled to love or truly embrace a family member?
  - Adults, perhaps it's the sibling whose personal views on life have always butted heads with yours
  - Kids, perhaps it's the embarrassing dad who has more lame dad jokes than thought humanly possible
  - Perhaps it's the distant relatives you meet at family reunions who are just a little too odd for comfort
  - Yes, some of those were present in the Gnuse world as well
    - Everything from a unique Academy Award winning special effects whiz to the former most tattooed woman in the world
    - All know "those" people
  - But what about the church? Have you ever struggled to love or embrace someone in God's family?
  - To see them for who they are now in Jesus, not who they used to be?
  - Such is the question before us this morning as we look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of our study on Philemon...

**MP:** As those who have been forgiven, we must lovingly welcome fellow members of God's family

- As we learned last week, all of us are Onesimus' (portrait of our unbelief)
  - Living in rebellion, enslaved to our sin, and hiding in darkness
  - Yet, for many of you, God has been gracious to search, find, and rescue
  - In so doing, he has given you a new identity; one that is free, one that is purposeful, and one that provides a brand-new family
  - Important for us to remember, b/c God does not stop his work at us
  - Constantly bringing new members into his spiritual family
  - Important to remember who we once were so that we too would welcome the Onesimus' in our own lives
    - So how should we do this?
    - What can we learn from the perspective of Philemon today?

**Prop:** Five ways we are expected to welcome fellow members of God's family.

Welcome fellow members by...

## **1. Remembering God's work of grace in your own life (vv.4-7)**

- Look at the encouragement Paul offers regarding Philemon in the opening verses of this letter
  - V.4, what is it that Paul remembers about Philemon whenever he prays for him?
  - Vv.5-7 puts emphasis on 2 things
    - His faith & love
  - In particular, faith in Jesus and love towards Jesus' people
  - Focus on the first one briefly
  - To say that Philemon has faith in Jesus is to say he is a Christian
  - If we learned anything from last week, it is that those who become Christians are recipients of grace

- Put another way, Philemon is just as much a recipient of God's grace as Onesimus is (level playing field)
- Paul's way or reminding Philemon that he is nothing apart from God
  - Was not more worthy, more righteous, better looking, better employee, or better student
  - 1 Cor. 6:9-11 "such were you"
- Philemon, like Onesimus, is who he is, because God was gracious to him when he didn't deserve it
  - Timely reminder of us all today
  - Often we fail to embrace others b/c we forget how gracious God was to us first
- But Paul also commends him for his love for Jesus' people
- Gives us reason to believe that Philemon was an overall good guy
- He was not a harsh master or calloused individual
- Paul is not one to fluff pillows that have no feathers in them (genuine)
- So what Paul wants Philemon to understand is that, as one who has

received God's love, he should now show that love toward others, particularly those in God's family

- **John 13:34** – as I have loved you, so you must love one another!
- Paul seems to make it clear that such love was not difficult for Philemon to display towards other saints (v.7) – He's refreshing
- But then comes the situation with Onesimus
- Now he comes face to face with someone who is difficult (know anyone?), useless, criminal, has wronged him (been wronged?)
  - You want me to do what?  
Welcome him? love him?
    - Do you know of any Christians who are hard to love?
- Paul begins his postcard by calling Philemon to consider who he has become b/c of Jesus
- Always the first step in welcoming others into God's spiritual family
  - Remember God's grace to you!

Welcome fellow Christians by...

## 2. **Forgiving them from a heart of love, not duty (vv.8-9, 12-14)**

- Our first point was important for what we are going to consider here
  - Paul is getting closer to his specific request of Philemon
  - But rather than come out and command something, he appeals to Philemon's heart (important tactic)
  - Doesn't want him to just do something because it's what he is expected to do (though he is)
    - V.8 he is waiving his right to use the "Apostle" trump card
    - Wants Philemon to act accordingly b/c of the work of Christ in his heart, not b/c he is having his arm twisted
  - Paul wants the right attitude to go with the right course of action
  - Look at what he says in v. 14

- Doesn't want Philemon to respond just b/c it is expected, but b/c it flows from love & goodness
- Connects us to our first point of how the love of God should overflow into our love for others (genuine)
- If God was so gracious to me, why should I not be gracious to others?
- A heart of forgiveness flows from love not obligation (duty)
  
- Consistent w/all Christian practice
  - God's concern has always been that His people obey out of a heart of love, not obligation
  - God has never worried about the externals b/c he is fixated on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7)
  - Obedience should never be about bondage or considered a burden
  - Rather freedom, joy, & love
    - When was the last time you stopped what you were doing (even at church) and evaluated if you were doing it from a heart of love or obligation?



- Applies to all areas: prayer, giving, singing, reading, etc.
- Overflows into every little detail of our lives, including forgiveness
- But let me ask you the question from a different angle
  - Was God obligated to forgive us? Was it his duty to do so?
  - No one was twisting his arm or telling him what he should do
  - He forgave us b/c of his love!
- So we must remember that any act of worship, including forgiveness, that does not have a right heart attitude is not truly forgiveness
  - Hard isn't it? Especially when they've hurt us in some deep way
  - More on that soon...
  - But we must also welcome such people by...

### 3. Seeing them for who they are now, not who they used to be (vv.15-16)

- One of the reasons we have a tough time embracing new Christians (or even forgiving them) is b/c we struggle to see their new identity in Christ
  - Much of our focus from last week
  - Paul sees God's majestic hand in this who situation
  - Your slave running away and costing you deeply
  - V.15 – perhaps this bad thing has happened to you for a greater good
  - What could that possibly be?
  - V.16 – that you gain a new brother in the Lord
    - **Gen. 50:20** – you meant it for evil, but God intended it for good
    - God's way of using something that looks messy for greater good
      - **Bob Ross** painting (old version of home reno shows) – looks like he messes something up but then turns it into something beautiful (transition off picture)

- The beauty in this postcard is that in running away, Onesimus actually became a Christian, which Philemon should rejoice in, right?
  - But Philemon has been deeply hurt by Onesimus; his actions cost him
  - And now Paul is saying to receiving him back, no longer seeing him first as a slave, but as a brother in Christ
    - Often I think our greatest barrier to welcoming new Christians is our difficulty in seeing them for who they now are
    - Only want to see them for who they used to be
    - Surely God wouldn't love them? Be gracious to them? Welcome them into his family?
    - Maybe God doesn't know who they are or what they've done?
    - "But they are so unworthy!"
    - Exactly, none of us are worthy, that's the whole point
    - There is only one worthy (Rev. 5) and he is the one who makes us acceptable to God!

- God knows exactly who they are & he knows who you once were also
  - Wants you to see them through the lens of the cross
- That was how Paul saw Onesimus
- He uses language throughout his letter: my heart, my son, your brother, our partner
- And if that is not enough to convince you, look over in Colossians
- Remember, the church in Colossae probably met in Philemon's house, which means both letters (to Philemon & church) were possibly composed at the same time
- And Paul sends the letter to the Colossians by Onesimus' own hand, and this is what he has to say about Onesimus to everyone in the closing verses
  - Read 4:7-9
- Do not hold people to their past sins, but see them for their present identity in Christ

## 4. Embracing their new place in our spiritual family (v.17)

- Here we come to the official request of Paul towards Philemon in postcard
  - Not directly asking him to forgive Onesimus, though that is involved
  - Not directly asking him to free Onesimus, though he could do so
  - No, what he is asking Philemon to do is welcome him back
  - In particular, v.17 – receive him as you would receive me
  - Bases it on that word we learned last week: koinonia
    - Means what? Fellowship
  - Here Paul uses it like a partnership term: if you have fellowship with me in our common faith (same team)
  - Paul is saying, if you and I are part of the same spiritual family, then I want you to fully welcome Onesimus into this spiritual family as well
    - Receive as if he was me
    - Roll out the welcome mat for him

- What is this “reception” Paul calls for
  - Not like a casual “welcome” to someone who comes to your house to join a party but then don’t interact with them the rest of the day/night
  - Paul: don’t just welcome him into your home, but your heart as well
  - This means a willingness to care for them as you would any other member of your physical family
  - Important to notice that Paul wants him to do this w/o partiality
  - How do I know that?
  - Paul essentially saying, I know that if I showed up at your front door, you would receive me with the warmest of welcomes
  - In fact, I still want you to do that, but do it for Onesimus instead
  - “Refresh” connection (vv.7, 12, 20)
    - Has to be difficult; Would have treated Paul great, but Philemon?
    - Have you ever been guilty of this? I’m willing to accept that they are a Christian, but I’ll just hold them at arm’s length

- Welcoming is far more than accepting; it is about embracing for who they are now in Christ
  - Doesn't mean everyone in the church has to be your best friend, but does it mean you treat them with full love & dignity of any other brother or sister in Christ
  - This is not necessarily a sermon on hospitality in the church, but I do think it has implications for how we think about welcoming people who walk through our doors (Sunday or any other day of the week)
  - I embrace the mindset that says hospitality is not primarily inviting people into your home, but it does mean making people feel at home wherever they are
    - How are you doing with that?
    - What ways are you intentionally seeking out new faces each week? (Partiality?)
    - Thankful for how we have grown, and as Paul writes to the Thess. Church: “excel still more”

Welcome fellow Christians by...

## 5. **Absorbing the cost of their previous debts against us (vv.18-20)**

- Goes back to what we talked about last week – Paul’s offer to pay debt
  - Seems as if Onesimus owes Philemon is some financial capacity
  - So would Philemon really be willing to transfer Onesimus’ debts to Paul?
  - Is he really supposed to send his bill to Rome, to the great apostle, who is currently imprisoned?
  - Doesn’t exactly seem like the appropriate thing to do, does it?
  - Believe Paul’s offer is genuine, but to some degree, we have to wonder if what Paul is really asking here is for Philemon to take the hit
    - Eat the loss, Philemon
  - After all, what greater reward could there be in all this than Onesimus becoming a Christian?
  - Is that not the greater payment than any financial restitution?



- Brings us back to a very important principle of forgiveness
  - Must be willing to forgive and overlook the offenses people previously committed against us
  - Love covers a multitude of sins
  - But even more so, it reminds us of the love Jesus first showed us
    - Remember: Matthew 18:21-35
    - Brief overview of parable
    - Couldn't possibly forgive them!
    - Yet how much more costly was our offense against God than what someone has done to us?
    - Begg: When I fail to forgive someone it's b/c I've exaggerated the offense against me, and I have minimized my offense against God
  - True forgiveness means that we are willing to absorb the cost to us; difficult in our "rights" culture
    - Financial, social, personal
    - Doing so is a true demonstration of the love God showed us
    - Eph. 4:32 – forgiving as Christ

**App:** Welcome others into God's family as he has graciously welcomed you.

- In no place is this better illustrated than in the parable of the prodigal son
  - Luke 15 reminds us of the running rebel who forsook his family, ran off with his father's money, and lived the high life as long as he could
  - In time, he was brought to a place of complete humiliation that broke him and caused him to run home to the father
  - How did the father welcome him?
    - Make him walk in shame?
    - Make him work to pay back the money he squandered?
    - Accept him back but as servant?
  - No, they partied like it was 1989
    - Hugged him, put ring on his finger, clothed him lavishly, killed the fatten calf, called all to join in the celebration of his son
  - This is the welcome of God toward prodigal partners (pray)

- Benediction (consider Col. 3:12-14)
  - V.12 – as God’s chosen ones (i.e. your new identity in Christ)
  - Put on characteristics of lowliness
  - Forgiveness in this culture was radical especially towards slaves
  - And remember, Philemon has the eyes of the church on him as he is reading this letter, all wondering what he is going to say or do
  - Easy to think: just forgive & move on, Philemon!
  - But forgiveness would have been seen as weakness (can often be considered that way in our culture)
  - Why take on these character traits?
  - V.13 – forgive as Christ has for you
  - How do you tie all these together?
  - V.14 – love – binds everything together in perfect harmony
  - Paul’s great concern in postcard
  - Peace among God’s people is so important, which is why Paul goes to great lengths to preserve it
    - Our focus will be for next week
    - Eph. 6:23-34