



Sermon Transcription • Philemon 8-20 (NIV)

Forgiveness

Pastor Greg Harris

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

My wife and I...our date nights were typically movie nights before we had kids. We would go out to the movie theatre, get a big thing of popcorn, cause that's really the reason that we're going to the movie. Anyways, eat the popcorn and watch kind of whatever was on. Since we've had kids, we have more movie date nights...at home. We don't go to the theatre quite as much, so we watch movies that we've seen before...a lot. One of the ones that we watch with some degree of frequency is the movie *Les Misérables*. You probably know the story. It's a very famous story, written by Victor Hugo in the 19th century. It's set in France in a time of real desperation and lack of everything around them, really desperate times. It's a story of a guy named Jean Valjean, he's imprisoned because he steals a loaf of bread to feed his family. And then he's released from prison, he has his little parole ticket, and he's trying to go get jobs and housing, and food, and he's being shut out everywhere he goes and he finds himself in a church cemetery. Then he actually meets a bishop. Look, it's mid-May, so just like all the other teachers out there in Abbotsford, instead of me talking more about it, let's just watch a few minutes of the clip, okay? So here's the scene of Jean Valjean engaging with the bishop. [Go to video at 1:22]

I wanted you to see that clip because I'm going to break into song at random parts in the sermon. [audience laughs] So it sets the tone. I wanted you to see the clip because it's a great visual representation of the same kind of scene that we have in the book of Philemon. See, Philemon's a very rich Christian man, who has a house church taking place in his own property. Onesimus is the name of his slave who was a runaway thief. And Onesimus is now standing before Philemon again, but instead of coming back with a shackles around his wrist, compelled by the armed guards; he now stands before his owner, with a letter in his hand, compelled by the one who wrote that letter to return to his master. And what we have in the story of Philemon is essentially a runaway slave coming back to his master and the question that we're asking today is: How is this letter going to instruct Philemon to respond to his runaway thief and slave? So what we're gonna learn from this section in the book of Philemon is we're gonna see two things that Paul instructs Philemon to do. He instructs him to:

1. Welcome your brother
2. Remember your debt

Philemon is looking at his runaway slave, he's holding the letter in his hand, instructed in the letter is going to say welcome your brother, and remember your debt.

LOVING GOD • LOVING ONE ANOTHER • LOVING THE WORLD



[Welcome Your Brother]

So first let's look at what Paul says about welcoming your brother. Philemon 8-14, he writes this,

“Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet 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— that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I 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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.”

So the back story is that Onesimus was a slave of Philemon, he runs away, he at some point in his running away becomes a Christian. And at some point after he becomes a Christian, he meets the Apostle Paul who is in chains for the gospel. And at some point in his time of knowing Paul, he actually begins partnering with Paul in gospel ministry. He's working alongside of Paul, we don't know what kind of work he did, but what we know is that Paul has such a soft spot in his heart for Onesimus, that he calls him his “very heart”, he calls him his “son”. So this runaway slave has now become a coworker with the Apostle Paul in the advance of the gospel. And now here he is, standing before the one from whom he ran away. And Paul continues on writing these words, Philemon 15-17,

“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no 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. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”

See, Paul knows that in order for Philemon to free Onesimus, he can't just come down heavy handed, he has to make an appeal to Philemon. So that he wouldn't feel forced into it, he'd be able to do this voluntarily. And what he's asking Philemon to do voluntarily is to look at his slave as no longer a slave, but as a brother.

We would, it would help us to understand a bit about the ancient world with slavery. Jeff talked about this two sermons ago in great length. So if you want to know deep details about what it looked like how Christianity doesn't actually support slavery but actually undercuts slavery, I want you to listen to that sermon. But just briefly, slavery in the ancient world in this context—the first century—it looked different in a lot of ways than what we think in our minds about modern day slavery. You wouldn't be able to look at a slave and tell that they were a slave because of the colour of their skin, or the job that they did, or the clothes that they wore. They were well and truly integrated in every aspect of society. The reason they were a slave because they weren't able to provide for themselves by their own



means. They were dependent on an owner, or a patron to provide for them. But it's not like slavery was like it was this great institution. The reality is that slaves were still not considered free people. They weren't considered individual persons. They were considered property. So here's Paul, writing this Christian slave owner Philemon telling him, "Don't treat him as your property. Look at him as a fellow man. More than that, as your brother in Christ. And even though he stole from you, I want you to look at him and you welcome him like you would welcome me. You welcome your brother."

See at the heart of the book of Philemon is an interpersonal conflict: someone who wronged someone else, and a call for forgiveness. Philemon is being prompted to respond to Onesimus the thief just like the bishop responded to Jean Valjean. When the thief is right before you, you forgive him. You welcome back your brother. The idea of forgiving those who have wronged us is core to what it means to be a Christian. It's not some periphery thing that we talk about once in a while because it doesn't have a lot to do with the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Forgiving others is right in the midst of the core of what it means to be a Christian. So much so that Jesus when his disciples came to him and they're like, "You gotta help us how to pray. Cause we don't know what we're doing. We've read so many prayer books but we still don't know what's going on. How do I pray?" Jesus tells them, Matthew 6:9-13,

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, *as we also have forgiven* our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'"

You noticed right in the middle of the instructed prayer that Jesus gives is to pray to God for the forgiveness of our sins, our trespasses, our debts; *in the same kind of way* that we forgive those who wronged us. See, the Christian story is not just about us receiving forgiveness from God, although it is, it's also about us extending that forgiveness now to those who have wronged us. It's a central necessary part of the Christian life. It's what the book of Philemon is all about. Matthew 18:21-22,

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times? [like a lot?]" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.' [like don't even keep count, Pete.]"

Anytime someone wrongs you, you forgive them. Colossians is a letter that Philemon came to—sorry, Onesimus came to Philemon with two letters in his hand. One was a little postcard that Paul wrote directly to Philemon about how do you deal with this runaway slave; the other letter in his hand was the book to the church of Colossae—the book of Colossians, that's where Philemon was. Here's what Paul wrote in *that* letter to Philemon and his church. He says, Colossians 3:13,

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."



Forgiveness of those who have wronged us is necessary in the Christian life. It's what the book of Philemon is all about. So the question is, how do we know if we've actually forgiven someone right? Like, what does it mean? Forgiveness seems like this esoteric, idea that floats around. But what does it look like in real terms to forgive others.

Well, think about like this. Forgiveness is an active thing that we do, whereas bitterness and rage and anger is something more passive. Here's what I mean by that. Bitterness is like, tea that's steeping in a cup. All it has to do is sit there and it just gets darker and darker and darker. But forgiveness is something that we have to actively do in order to remove the bitterness that we're experiencing. Thaleia is one of our care pastors here at Northview and she talks about forgiveness similar to Tylenol. Right, you know when you're feeling ill, and you get the aches and you get the chills, and...you're just feeling awful. You take a Tylenol. Now sometimes the sickness is not a big deal, you take one Tylenol and no problem. It's over. Other times though, the sickness is more severe and you gotta take Tylenol a few more times. So it is with forgiveness. Sometimes people wrong us and it's not a big deal, we take one little dose of forgiveness and we don't have the bitterness or rage or anger brewing in our hearts anymore. It's not steeping in the cup. But other times when people wrong us, man, that bitterness rises up again. And so we have to take another dose. Forgiveness is an active posture on our part to remove bitterness, rage, and anger. One of the best illustrations of forgiveness in all of scripture is the story of the prodigal son. It's a really well known story. It's from the book of Luke. We're actually gonna look at it. Luke 15:11-24,

“Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country [he became a slave, this son], who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father. ‘But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.’”

The posture of the father is a great example of what it looks like to have a forgiving heart. See, this young wayward son stole so much from the inheritance. He wasted all the money and yet you don't see the picture of the father, sitting on his deck drinking his bitter tea. You have a picture of a father who's already done work in his heart to forgive his wayward son so much so that he's scanning the horizons waiting for his son to return one day hopefully. He already had a posture of a proactive posture to forgive his son. He already removed the bitterness from his heart. He already took his dose. The bitterness wasn't there. He was looking out to await his son's return.



Look, here's a question because often times we'll think to ourselves, "Don't we only need to forgive people if they've actually repented of their sin, right?" Like in this story of the prodigal son we have the son, preparing his speech. The reason he's coming back is because he's repentant right? So do we only extend forgiveness, do we only forgive those who've actually recognized, repented, confessed of their wrongdoing towards us? What do the scriptures tell us about that? Well Romans 12:17-18,

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Regardless of what other people do, what's your role? You do what needs to be done so you can live at peace with everyone. Another passage, Ephesians 4:31-32,

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

See the role that we have to play when people wrong us, is to refuse to let the bitter tea steep and drink it. Instead we forgive those who wrong us. You do know that the father forgave the son in the story before he even got to say his speech. Sure, the son was repentant, but the father didn't know that. He just forgave him anyways. Or like the bishop with Jean Valjean, you know Jean Valjean when he was brought in by the cops didn't say, "I'm so sorry..." The bishop just looked at him and said, "Hey you forgot something..." Which to the guards, they're thinking, "Well man, the story plays out..." But in Jean Valjean's mind, he knows "This man's just forgiven me." See forgiveness is not something that we do in response to someone's confession, forgiveness is the proactive move that we make to remove bitterness, and rage and anger for the wrong that they have done to us. Forgiveness is necessary for the Christian. It's what the book of Philemon's all about.

But I do think it would be helpful for us to think for a minute, to make a few distinctions right? because this is an interpersonal kind of topic. This is dealing with more than one party, the reality is I don't know every single one of your stories. I know a lot of your stories, but I can say with a good degree of confidence that people have wronged you. That as you're sitting here, and hearing a message about forgiveness, you have people in instances in situations just flooding through your head as you're thinking about real life occurrences where people have wronged you. And the reality is that there are going to be different stages of what that relationship is gonna look like, right? So here's what I mean. There's a distinction I think between forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration. Forgiveness is a one person job. That's on *us*, you and me to forgive those who have wronged us. Rather than sit and let our bitterness brew and steep, it's our job actually to forgive. But the relationship might not be fully restored and reconciled because the other person might not ever recognized the wrong that they do. In the Canadian context, they might not know because we don't tell 'em. Or they might know what they've done is wrong, but they won't actually confess. So the relationship might experience a kind of fracture. But like Romans tells us, you did everything you could to live at peace with one another. You've forgiven them. You've gotten rid of the bitterness and the rage and the anger.



So forgiveness is our job, that's a one person job. But reconciliation's a two person gig. When someone recognizes the wrong that they've done and there's a level of peace that's brought to the situation that now when you look at each other in the halls of church, or in the halls of different stores and town, or wherever, or in the halls of your home. The bitterness is gone and the relationship has a degree of peace to it. But restoration is what we're after. Restoration is the realization of the relationship back to where it was and as we pray as pastors over situations of conflict all the time, we pray that relationships would be restored so that they're even better than they were before. Restoration, reconciliation, that's a two way deal. But forgiving those who wrong you? That's on us. It's necessary for the Christian live to forgive those who wrong you. The person who's wronged you may never return with the prepared "I'm sorry" speech. But that doesn't get us off the hook from actually forgiving them. It's the question we have to ask ourselves are: Are we a grudge holder? Are we a bitter tea drinker? Or are we like the bishop with Valjean and like the father with the prodigal son and like Philemon with Onesimus? Are we actually willing to forgive? It's what the story of Philemon's all about. Paul tells Philemon, look you need to welcome back Onesimus as your brother.

[Remember Your Debt]

The question is, okay so why? Why should Philemon do this? Why would Philemon welcome Onesimus back as his brother and why are we supposed to forgive other people? Second point, remember your debt. Philemon 17, Paul writes,

“So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.”

So Paul tells Philemon, “Look you need to welcome Onesimus back as your brother. Actually, welcome him back as if you're welcoming me to your house.” Right? So you can almost imagine the scene play out for Philemon where Onesimus comes back, and he glances over the letter, he gets the gist of it, “I'm supposed to welcome you back. Okay. Fine. Come on, there's your old room. Don't forget I like breakfast at eight. Don't forget to make my orange juice freshly squeezed, okay?” And his wife comes alongside him and says, “Okay Phil, here's the deal. Remember... Paul said welcome Onesimus back as *we would* welcome *Paul*. So how would we treat Paul, Philemon?” And now Philemon has to change his tune a little bit, he has to think to himself, “Okay. So maybe he doesn't get his old room, maybe he gets the best room. And actually maybe I'll make you your breakfast.” Paul says, “Look, I want you to welcome Onesimus back as if you were welcoming me. Welcome your brother.” And then Paul tells him, “Look, the reason I want you to welcome him back is, if there's anything that's owing, cause I know he stole from you. If there's anything owing—I'll pay it back!” And then he makes the most passive aggressive move of all his letters, “Look I'll pay you back—but you owe me everything. I mean, if you want to cash this in, you can... but remember, I mean, you already owe me everything.” This is the mom with her children, right? The one child steals \$10 from another child, and the mother says, “You need to apologize, you need to forgive your brother. Look, if they



owe you money I'll pay you that back. But remember, I make it so that you can actually live...Like you have a bed, and clothes, and food, and friends, and toys. But if you want to cash in the \$10 today, you go for it."

What is Paul doing here? Paul is saying, "Look it's not like you owe me everything because it's through my work that you have all your money." Right, Philemon was well and truly wealthy outside of Paul's influence. What Philemon owes Paul is the fact that the gospel went forward to Gentiles because of Paul's ministry. That people like Philemon know the good news of Jesus Christ *because* of the Apostle Paul. So Paul's saying, "Okay. If you want to cash in that debt, go for it. Just remember the only reason you have a hope in the gospel and eternal life is because of my ministry. So welcome back your brother. Remember your debt. And welcome back your brother."

See the Christian life is actually one of continually remembering the debt that we have. Continually remembering the gospel message. the gospel message is the core of the Christian life. The gospel's the good news that runaway rebels become children. The gospel's the good news that there's a God who made all things for himself including us. And yet we saw all of that was ours in God's house and we decided to runaway stealing his own glory. And runaway as rebels and as thieves. But God wasn't content to wait for us to return to the doorstep like Valjean came back to the bishop. He wasn't content to wait until he saw us return on the distant horizon like the father waiting for the son. He wasn't content to see us back at his front door like Onesimus with Philemon. What God did instead was he *pursued* us rebels, ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ came so he can live the live that we needed to live. He died so that he could pay for our debt. He rose again to promise us a future and a hope in eternal home. And after he completed his work, he gets to running. And he sprints after rebels like you and like me. And he finds us in the garbage dumps of the world. And he looks at us, and he's out of breath from the chase, and he looks at us and he says, "Look, I've made a way! Look at the scars. I know your'e enslaved to death right now, but I've made a way to purchase you out of that and bring you back home." There's an excitement in his voice as he looks at you in your eyes and he says, "Look, you're with me now. I'll bring you home. Just follow me. I'll do everything that's necessary. You just follow me and I'll bring you home." And he starts us on a journey.

And as we're journeying back home with Jesus, there's parts of the journey that has really nice warm sandy beaches, and we sit and we enjoy a cold drink on a sandy beach and we think to ourselves and we say to Jesus, "Man, this part of the journey's really great." And he says, "Yeah you're right. But you follow me." And there's parts in the journey on the way home where it's not a sandy beach it's actually a hike. It's no longer shade, it's sweltering sun. We're cut, and we're bruised, and we're mangled, and we say to our Jesus, "This part of the journey is hard." And he looks at us and he says, "Yeah, but you follow me. I'll get you home." And sure enough he keeps his word. We get to a house and he puts his arms around us. And he starts walking into the house, and we think to ourselves, "Don't you—you should probably knock first right?" He says, "No, I don't have to knock. I own this place." He comes inside the house and he calls out, "Dad! Dad we got her! We found her! She's back.



She's here." And we hear running down the steps [knocks]. We look inside the eyes of the father and he looks at us and he says, "Anyone who is with my son is my child. Welcome home." Look, and we look at ourselves, and we think "There's no way that I should be welcomed in this house because my shoes are dirty, and my clothes are ragged, and I know all the things that I did wrong, that I shouldn't have done, I know all the things that I should've done that were right, but I didn't do them. I'm aware that my thoughts all the time are about my own prized possessions, my own identity, my own pride." And we think to ourselves, "I can't go into that house looking like this." And he looks at us and he says, "No, we'll clothe you my child. Anyone who's with my son, is my child. Welcome home."

The gospel is the good news that runaway rebels become children. And the Christian life is one of remembering and ruminating and contemplating that good news. The Christian life is also the simple but difficult work of considering how the gospel now impacts every area of our lives. In light of that news, that's true and good and beautiful, now how do we live? Right? The clip from *Les Misérables* where Jean Valjean comes forward to the bishop after he's stolen everything and the bishop says "It's okay. You forgot these candlesticks." Once the guards leave and the scene is kind of cleared, the bishop looks at Jean Valjean, and he says, "Now in light of this kindness, live differently. Live a different kind of life in light of the riches that you've received." That's the call on us as Christians. Remember the debt that we owe, remember that we were rebels but now we're kids. And now how do we live in light of that?

Like with those who have wronged us? How do we respond to those who have wronged us so severely? Well Jesus tells a little story in Matthew 18:21-33 to help us with that,

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore [let me tell you a story, Pete], the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'



“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’”

Christian, you’ve been forgiven much. Who are we to withhold forgiveness from those who have wronged us? It’s not just unwise to not forgive, it’s wicked. Forgiveness is necessary. It’s hard. It’s gritty. It’s difficult. It’s necessary. Think of the gospel and all that you have because of it. And now when you think of the one who wronged you, live in light of that gospel. See this is a principle that applies to all of life, it’s not just for forgiveness. The idea that the gospel is what we think about and then live in light of is what motivates all Christian obedience in every area of life. Money, we want laws about what it looks like to be obedient. We say, “Give me a percentage of how much I’m supposed to give. I want to live in obedient Christian life. So tell me, what’s the percentage of my income that I need to give to be a good Christian man, a good Christian woman?” and what Paul says is actually, think about the gospel and now how much should you give. He says that explicitly 2 Corinthians 8:8-12,

“I am not commanding you [So Paul’s writing to the Corinthians trying to get some fundraising efforts going for a poor church in Jerusalem, he says **I am not commanding you**], but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

What is he saying? “Okay, when it comes to giving of your money, the people who are in need and to the work of the gospel, I’m not gonna give you a law, what I’m gonna say is think about the gospel. And now live in light of it.” The Christian life is the simple but difficult work of considering how the gospel impacts and influences each area of our lives. Like our sexuality, right? You’re in a dating relationship and you’re thinking to yourself, “Okay. What’s the boundaries that I’m allowed to kind of go close to but still be like a good Christian person right? Is it holding hands? Is it kissing? Is it something more? What’s the law? How do I act in this relationship” Well, think of the gospel, and now live in light of it. Or entertainment, “What kinds of movies should I watch? What kind of films should I engage in? What kind of entertainment should I pursue? Give me a law. Give me a rating that I won’t watch anything over that rating ever. So help me God.” No. Think about the gospel...and now live in light of it. Because the Christian life is the simple but difficult work of considering how the gospel impacts and influences each area of our lives.

That’s what’s Paul’s telling Philemon. You’re faced with your runaway slave who’s wronged you. But I need you to remember your debt, Philemon. I need you to welcome your brother. So are we willing to do that as well? Are we willing to be like the bishop and be like Philemon? Are we willing to remember



our debt? And then when we're faced with the ones who have wronged us, are we willing to look at them and say, "Welcome home"?

Let me pray for us. Father I'm thankful for your word. I'm thankful for the fact that it engages with real people in real situations and real life and the difficulties and the complexities of real life. I'm thankful for the instruction that you gave through Paul to Philemon to forgive those who have wronged us. and Lord I pray that you would help us have deep in our minds, and deep in our souls, a picture of the beauty and the goodness of the gospel. that it would overwhelm us, that we would sing your praises because of it. We would pray and praise because of it. And we would also in every area of our lives live in light of it. Lord would you empower us to do it. We can't do it on our own power, we need your Spirit to do it in us. Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors. For your glory in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.