

# The Character of Forgiveness

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## Philemon - A Book of Forgiveness

The apostle Paul is in house arrest in Roman, and writes to his fellow-worker in the Lord, Philemon. Paul starts out his letter by greeting Philemon and the church in his house. Paul praises the faith of Philemon and his love towards God and the people of God. Then Paul asks Philemon to forgive Onesium. Onesium was a servant of Philemon, who stole from his master, and then ran away to Rome. Now Paul is sending Onesium back to Philemon, and asking Philemon to forgive this man. Paul promises to repay Philemon anything that Onesium has wronged him. Paul has confidence that Philemon will forgive Onesium because Paul knows the Christian character that is in Philemon.

The important thing to understand about forgiveness is that it is not a matter of over looking the wrong that has been done, but rather dealing with it so both parties can move on.

Paul had already written much about forgiveness in his prison letters to the Ephesians and Colossians.

In Christ we have the forgiveness of sins. (Ephesians 1:7) *In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.*

Forgive one another just as God forgave us. (Ephesians 4:32) *And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*

Made alive in Christ through forgiveness. (Colossians 2:13) *And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses.*

Support and forgive one another. (Colossians 3:13) *Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.*

Let us look at the pattern Paul uses. He reminds us of our forgiveness in Christ Jesus and then asks that we forgive. As we understand that we have been forgiven and then to seek to forgive speaks of the character of forgiveness. How you forgive has something to say about your character.

The trials of life can either destroy us or mold our character to be more Christ-like. (Romans 5:3-5, NKJV) *And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation works patience; (4) And patience, experience; and experience, hope: (5) And hope makes not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us.*

In the book of Philemon we see that there are four characteristics of forgiveness; they are labor, love, share, and refresh.

### The First Characteristic of Forgiveness - Labor

(Philemon 1-3, NKJV) *Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow labourer, (2) And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: (3) Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul identifies the first character of forgiveness as "labor." The character of forgiveness is seen in the effort/labor that we put forth to forgive others and to move forward in the will and work of God. It is the will of God to forgive others, and when we do this we are able to move

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forward in the work of God. Paul reminds Philemon of the laboring/striving character that was visible in him. Philemon was a “*co-laborer*” who was working the same work as Paul. Their lives were to be entwined with the business of the Father.

We live in an ego-centered, selfish world that knows and cares little about forgiveness. We see forgiving people as weak and unforgiving ones as strong. Our culture celebrates and exalts those TV and movie heroes who take vengeance on others. The result is a society filled with bitterness, vengeance, anger, hate and hostility. Retaliatory crimes take place as people seek vengeance either inside or outside the law.

For a Christian, unwillingness to forgive is unthinkable. It is a rebellious, open act of disobedience to God. We are to forgive others as God has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). **Failure to do so will bring at least four unpleasant results...**

**First - Failure to forgive will imprison believers in their past.** (Philippians 3:13) *Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but **this one thing I do**, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before.*

Unforgiveness keeps the pain alive; it never allows the wound to heal. Dwelling on the wrong done feeds anger and resentment and robs one of the joy of living. Forgiveness, on the other hand, opens the prison doors and sets the believer free from the past. The only way to move forward is to put behind us those things that were done to us in the past.

**Second - Unforgiveness produces bitterness.** (Hebrews 12:15, GodsWord) *Make sure that everyone has kindness from God so that bitterness doesn't take root and grow up to cause trouble that corrupts many of you.*

The longer believers dwell on offenses committed against them, the more bitter they become. Bitterness is not just a sin; it is an infection. A bitter person's speech is cutting, sarcastic, even slanderous. Bitterness distorts a person's whole outlook on life, producing violent emotions, intolerance, and thoughts of revenge. It is especially devastating to any relationship. Bitterness shuts off the love and kindness that should exist between people.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, replaces bitterness with love, joy, peace, and the other fruits of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22-23.

**Third - Unforgiveness gives Satan an open door.**

(Ephesians 4:26-27) *Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: (27) Neither give place to the devil.*

We need to understand that Satan wants to destroy us and the whole church. When we forgive each other, then we do not give Satan an opportunity to destroy the church.

(2 Corinthians 2:10-11, GodsWord) *If you forgive someone, so do I. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did in the presence of Christ for your benefit. (11) I don't want Satan to outwit us. After all, we are not ignorant about Satan's scheming.*

Love fulfills the law towards others. (Romans 13:8, NKJV) *Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loves another has fulfilled the law.*

(Romans 13:8, GodsWord) Pay your debts as they come due. However, one debt you can never finish paying is the debt of love that you owe each other. The one who loves another person has fulfilled Moses' Teachings.

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So, a lack of love violates the law. Unforgiveness is a lack of love.

## **Fourth - Unforgiveness hinders fellowship with God.**

(Matthew 6:14-15) For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: (15) But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

It is a serious matter nonetheless to know that one cannot be right with God if he is unforgiving of others. Forgiveness restores the believer to the place of maximum blessing from God. It restores the purity and joy of fellowship with God.

Forgiveness is so important that the Lord devoted an entire book of the Bible to it. In the brief book of Philemon, the spiritual duty to forgive is emphasized, but not in principle, parable, or word picture. Through a real life situation involving two people dear to him, Paul teaches the importance of forgiving others.

Following the introduction in verses 1-3, Paul describes the spiritual character of one who forgives in verses 4-7. Such a person has a concern for the Lord, a concern for people, a concern for fellowship, a concern for knowledge, a concern for glory, and a concern to be a blessing.

The first character of forgiveness is that it “**labors**” to do the work of God. Jesus at a young age announced, “**I must be about my Father's business**” (Luke 2:49). Jesus on the cross announced, “**Father forgive them...**” (Luke 23:34). If Jesus did not forgive those that crucified Him, then He would not have completed the **work of salvation** that He came here to do.

Those who learn to forgive are those who have experienced God’s grace and peace. God’s grace toward us forgives us and His peace allows us to know we are forgiven. We who have the character of God born in us need to be laboring in the Father's business of forgiveness. We want to forgive because we want to move forward and do the work of God.

## **The Second Characteristic of Forgiveness - Love**

(Philemon 4-5) I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, (5) Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints.

Paul begins the main body of his letter by praising Philemon. It was not Paul’s intent to flatter him. Rather, the apostle knew that legitimate praise encourages us to do the right thing. The virtuous character of Philemon becomes the foundation upon which Paul bases his appeal for him to forgive Onesimus. Paul states his thanks to God for the good and positive things he is hearing about Philemon. A testimony is not just something we say, but what others have to say about us. Everything Paul heard about Philemon was good.

So here, Paul identifies the second character of forgiveness as “love.” Philemon was a man who loved God and others.

Love is the key to forgiveness. We forgive in the degree we love. Paul heard testimony of Philemon’s faith toward the Lord. Philemon had become a living testimony of love and faith.

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**LOVE (verse 5) (Greek – agape)** – Selfless, self-sacrificing love, such as God’s love toward us. Love is the characteristic word of Christianity.

We can see the ultimate gift of love in the Lamb of God giving His life for us.

(Romans 5:8) But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

(1 John 3:16) Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

Love seeks the welfare of all. (Romans 15:2, GodsWord) We should all be concerned about our neighbor and the good things that will build his faith.

Love wants no harm to any. (Romans 13:8-10, GodsWord) Pay your debts as they come due. However, one debt you can never finish paying is the debt of love that you owe each other. The one who loves another person has fulfilled Moses' Teachings. (10) The commandments, "Never commit adultery; never murder; never steal; never have wrong desires," and every other commandment are summed up in this statement: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." (10) Love never does anything that is harmful to a neighbor. Therefore, love fulfills Moses' Teachings.

Love seeks opportunity to do good. (Galatians 6:10) As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.

Philemon’s love was bi-directional – toward God and toward man. Philemon had a real concern about people; when you do it is easier to forgive.

## The Third Characteristic of Forgiveness - Share

(Philemon 6, NKJV) That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

(The Message): “And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it.”

The third character of forgiveness is its willingness to share.

The Greek word **Koinonia** is rendered in these verses as “sharing” or “fellowship.”

Fellowship that causes individual believers to belong to one another. (Romans 12:15) Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.

The word focused on Philemon’s relationship with other Christians. Paul prayed that Philemon’s faith would show itself in **koinonia** among the believers, especially those that would meet in his home (v. 1:2). The “faith” that Philemon was called to share was both the content of what he believed (**doctrine**) and the practical demonstration of his devotion to Christ. The word “fellowship” also anticipated Paul’s coming request on behalf of a new believer who would become part of that group.

Paul prayed that Philemon would be active in this fellowship and sharing. Paul would later ask Philemon to welcome Onesimus as if he were Paul, and that Philemon should charge any of Onesimus’ debts to Paul (vv. 1:17-19). This is true fellowship/sharing, Christians giving to one another and caring for one another because they belong to one another.

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That concern for fellowship was also motivation for Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Failing to do so would lead to a rift in the fellowship since Onesimus was now also a believer. By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would maintain the harmony, peace, and unity of the church.

(Philemon 6, NKJV) That the sharing of your faith may become **effective** by the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

(Philemon 6, BBE) That the faith which you have in common with them may be working with **power**...

The word “effective” (“effectual” in the KJV) which literally means “powerful.” Such an act of forgiveness would send a powerful message to the church about the importance of fellowship, even among slaves and masters. Forgiving a fellow believer, no matter what their offense, makes a strong statement of concern for fellowship.

Philemon had a real faith in the Lord, and he desired fellowship with others. It is faith that allows one to share with others the message of the Gospel. How can we share the message of Christ – “the forgiveness of sins” – if we can’t forgive? Philemon’s willingness to forgive would be based on his knowledge of his own forgiveness.

## The Fourth Character of Forgiveness - Refresh

(Philemon 7, NKJV) – For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

The fourth character of forgiveness is refreshment/comfort. Philemon had a reputation for **love**, a fact that brought Paul much joy and comfort. Through Philemon, the hearts of the saints had been *refreshed*.

“**Refreshed**” is a military term that speaks of an army resting from a march. Through Philemon, the hearts of the saints had been *refreshed*. Philemon brought troubled people rest and renewal; he was a peacemaker. Philemon, as far as we know, was not an elder, deacon, or teacher in the church. Most likely, he was a businessman. But he was a man of instinctive kindness, a source of blessing to everyone. That kind of person, Paul knew, could be counted on to forgive.

We need good fellowship because it refreshes our souls. Unforgiveness will break the good fellowship that we all need.

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