

An Introduction to Philemon

The book of Philemon is unique in many ways. It is the shortest of all Paul's writings. It is the only one of the prison epistles addressed to an individual. It does not teach the lofty doctrines as does Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, but it does deal with a vitally important subject – forgiveness. Paul takes the same truth taught at Ephesus and Colosse and applies it to his letter written to Philemon.

Paul said to the church at Ephesus, “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32). The theme of forgiveness runs throughout the Bible, and the scriptures clearly teach that God is a forgiving God.

The theme of forgiveness is nowhere better illustrated than in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus said, “A certain man [father] had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living” (vv. 11-12). Verse 13 tells us that the younger son after a few days decided to leave home, and in so doing, he gathered his inheritance together and left. His journey from home took him into a far country. And without any discipline, he spent all his inheritance, living a shameless immoral life.

In verse 14 the narrative shifts to the unforeseen that the young man had not given thought of. Read carefully the following, beginning with verse 14: “And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain [willingly or gladly] have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him” (vv. 14-16).

Finally the young man came to his senses and exclaimed, “How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (vv. 17-20).

I think verse 20 is a great verse. While the father's son was still a long ways away, the father ran to him and embraced him. Later, the father threw a feast to celebrate his son's return (vv. 22-24).

It has been said that the story of the prodigal son illustrates how God, represented in the story by the father, is willing to forgive.

The theme of forgiveness is important in Paul's letter to Philemon. Onesimus, a slave, had stolen from his master Philemon, and had run away. He made his way to Rome, where he came

into contact with the apostle Paul, who led him to faith in Christ. Now Onesimus was faced with doing what was right as a Christian. His Christian duty called upon him to return to his master.

Since death would normally have been his punishment, Paul wrote to Philemon on the behalf of Onesimus, seeking that Philemon forgive him.

Forgiveness is not only a wonderful thing, but a needful thing. Forgiveness is something that we all need to practice. For if we are unforgiving, guilt will eat away at our joy. And joy is important to Christian maturity.

Jerry W. Arnold
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