Paul’s Letter to

Philemon

***“Brother, Can You Spare A Slave?”***

R

acking their brains for a last-minute escape plan, three felons are facing a firing squad. First, a Redmond techie sporting a logo’d pocket pencil holder, waits for “Ready, Aim….” then yells, “Earthquake!” Marksmen scatter, and he vanishes.

Next, a ripped beast from Beacon Hill, stands mute until he hears “… Aim …” -- then he shouts, “Rainier’s exploding!” The riflemen flee in panic; the beast disappears.

The third guy, an ex-deejay from Duvall, knows how to outwit his executioners; he too will fake a disaster. So when he hears, “Ready, Aim ….” he screams “Fiiii-errrr!”

**Jail Mail**

In 1st century A.D. there are 60 million slaves in Rome’s vast Empire, each for sale for some 500 denarii, a laborer’s average day’s wage (almost one U.S. cent). Educated or skilled servants, up to a dollar. Now we tail a fugitive slave, a prisoner and a man of means in Paul’s brief letter to his faith-brother, Philemon. **Let’s read it (p 477, Msg).**

**The Wind Up**

**Philemon vv 1-7**

It’s circa A.D. 60-61. Paul is under house arrest in Rome for two years, waiting to appear before Nero (Acts 28:17-20). Scarred from beatings for speaking out for his Lord, Paul calls himself a prisoner for Jesus Christ. He’s ramping up to make a startling proposal to Philemon. We’ll call him Phil, an affluent gentleman from Colossae in what today is central Turkey. Paul had introduced Phil to Jesus earlier while starting the church at Ephesus on the coast, and now the Colossian believers meet in Phil’s home.

For 2,000 years this letter has been a tutorial about God’s justice, love, forgiveness, grace and mercy. Previously Paul was Saul, a Law-abiding, religious zealot who terrorized Christ’s followers. In a blinding flash Jesus totally transforms Saul into Paul to bring Jesus’ Truth to Europe. If God can change Saul into Paul, there’s hope for you and me.

**DISCUSS: Who do you know who’s experienced this miraculous transformation? Describe what happened.**

**The Pitch**

**Philemon vv 8-25**

Some scholars think Onesimus may be Phil’s blood brother to whom he’d gone deep in debt. To pay it off, Onesimus may have sold himself to Phil, becoming his slave. Onesimus goes AWOL, perhaps with Phil’s cash or valuables, lands in Rome, meets Paul and accepts Christ. Urging Onesimus to set things right, Paul sends him to Phil with this request: “Welcome Onesimus just as you would welcome me, and I’ll pay you what he owes you.” Martin Luther King may have had this in mind when he said, *“Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline.”*

We say “Pardon me” when we inadvertently invade someone’s space. But do we actually forgive and accept others? This letter is one of the Bible’s best models of viewing other Christ-followers as our equals -- forgiven and accepted as fellow billboards for Jesus.

**DISCUSS: Given your opportunities to be His billboard, what aspect of Jesus’ character do you want to display today?**

Deprived of all rights, Onesimus is re-created by God as a *brother* to both Paul and Phil (2 Corinthians 5:19; Galatians 3:28; 1 Timothy 1:15-17)! This simple story of forgiveness, transformation, freedom and restoration has for centuries inspired brave souls to condemn and outlaw the evil travesty of slavery.

When God’s people realize that “in Christ” they’re all equal, history has shown that bigotry takes a back seat. Slave trading was ruled illegal throughout the British Empire in 1833, spearheaded by William Wilberforce, a believer dedicated to this cause.

The key to this little letter is v. 16 where Paul says to Phil that he’s sending Onesimus back not as a *slave* but as a beloved *brother-in-Christ*, worth more to Phil now than ever. In a play on his friend’s name, Paul says that “Useful” (i.e. Onesimus) has recently been Useless to you, but he’s even more Useful to you now.

**DISCUSS: Why is v. 16 such a radical idea?**

We don’t know if Phil emancipates Onesimus and keeps him “on staff” or sends him back to assist Paul. Although Paul, appointed by the risen Christ as an apostle, has the gravitas to *order* Phil to act, he prefers to *appeal* to Phil based on love. Phil has every legal right to severely punish or even kill Onesimus who’s not only his property, but now is his spiritual brother and a fellow co-heir with Jesus!

Will Phil embrace his errant slave? If so, other servants might bolt for freedom too. If Phil spurns his new brother-in-Christ, what example is he of God’s forgiveness?

**DISCUSS: If you were Phil, what would you do? Why?**

Why doesn’t the Bible bash slavery? Scripture assuredly doesn’t endorse it, not with Paul shouting, “It’s for freedom that Christ has set you free” (Galatians 5:1)! Paul encourages those in bondage to get their freedom if possible (1 Corinthians 7:21–24). He instructs Christ-following slaves and masters to respect each other (Ephesians 6:5-9). And Jesus taught about love, impartiality and freedom (Matthew 5:13–16).

Imagine the minute details of Onesimus’ slide into debt, becoming a slave, escaping, meeting Paul, coming to Christ, returning to Phil. How does God make all this happen!

**DISCUSS: Describe a situation where it must have been God who arranged and resolved the impossible in your life, or for someone you know.**

**DISCUSS: What will you take away today from peering into the lives of these men?**

**Who’s Buying?**

Paul’s offer to reach for the check for what Onesimus did to Phil is a picture of Christ’s paying the full penalty for your sin and mine. As the only *perfect* sacrifice, *acceptable* to God to take every sinner’s place on the cross, Jesus paid a debt He did not owe (Isaiah 53:6; John 1:29; Hebrews 7:27 and 9:26).

Only the inscrutable grace of God could make a way for us to avoid eternal destruction and grant us the unmerited honor of spending forever with Him (Ephesians 2:1–10). On the cross Jesus’ forgave those who crucified Him and those whose sin sent Him there (that includes you and me). In return our Lord said to His Father, “Put everybody’s sin on my tab, and welcome them just as You would Me” (2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Ephesians 1:6; 4:32)! This love note from Paul is a reminder that:

1. We’re all equally lost without a Savior (Romans 3:23 and 6:23; 1 John 2:2).
2. We’re all equally loved by God (Acts 10:34-35).
3. We honor God when we’re loving and serving others (1 John 3:16).
4. It’s best to let the Holy Spirit persuade others to do what’s right (Romans 8:6).

My friend John Milgate asks, “What sin against you has Jesus not already paid for? If His death is sufficient to satisfy His Father, why is it not enough to satisfy you?” The grace of God does not force us. It draws us to its warm light like a bee to a summer bloom, not out of fear but of desire instilled there by the Holy Spirit. Grace takes us farther than force. It destroys barriers and creates something from nothing, and life from death.

**Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word**

… but Elton raked in a small fortune singing about it. As did Chicago who found it “hard to say I’m sorry.” A snappy “I forgive you” or “Please forgive me” isn’t enough, especially when the offended one wants justice or revenge, not reconciliation.

Author Steve Diehl notes that God, who is both holy and just, found a way to forgive and be just, all at the same time. It was the cross. When we fail to forgive, we hurt ourselves and postpone healing. The Bible says it’s okay to be angry, but not to the point where our anger triggers a sinful response. Diehl suggests these steps to authentic forgiveness:

1. **Identify** the sin and who’s responsible for it, as God sees it.
2. **Feel** the emotional impact of that sin, as God feels it.
3. **Agree** with God’s justified condemnation of that sin, as God condemns it.
4. **Accept** Christ’s death as total **payment** for that sin, as God accepts it.
5. **Thank** God for His having forgiven your offender; forgive your offender or ask to be forgiven, as God has already forgiven you.
6. **Receive** God’s love; love your offender or the one you offended, as God loves.

Has someone bumped into you or your car and said flippantly, “Sorry?” That just ticks you off more. Gary Chapman, in *The Five Languages of Apology*, lays out statements that comprise a meaningful, respectful apology – but only if all five are spoken sincerely:

1. “I’m sorry.”

2. “I was wrong.”

3. “What can I do to make it right?”

4. “I’ll try not to do that again.”

5. “Will you please forgive me?”

**DISCUSS: What’s been your experience with asking for or giving forgiveness?**

Have you ever taken hold by faith of God’s forgiveness of your sin, and invited Him to lead you in life? Why not do it now? It’s too important to dally. Start by telling Him, “God, I know I’m a sinner. I’ve been serving the wrong master, so now I’m surrendering to you. Thank you for pardoning my sin .. in full .. and forever. I resign my imagined control of my life and gladly accept Christ as my Savior. All because of Jesus. Amen.”

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