

TRUE FREEDOM: FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION



Scripture:

Psalm 1

¹Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; ²but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. ³They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

⁴The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. ⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; ⁶for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Philemon 1:1-21

(Paul is speaking from prison in Rome in a letter.)

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ²to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for

a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

(And to finish this letter from Paul he ends it with —)

“One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow-workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



A video about Philemon was shown to the congregation.

<https://youtu.be/aW9Q3Jt6Yvk>

Now you know a whole book of the Bible! You can tell your friends all about the letter from Paul to Philemon in just a few short minutes! Isn't that cool?

I get excited about such things. But you don't have to.

Still, what the world needs now is what this book is all about! What the world needs now is.....? Forgiveness and reconciliation!! Say it with me: forgiveness and reconciliation!

If you live your life with forgiveness and reconciliation, which are born from the love of God, you are living a life in Christ. When you live your life “in the Messiah,” as the letter to Philemon describes it, then you are living a life following the way of Christ.

THE WAY

So, from what you just watched, you can see that the “way” is the way of equality. All are equal in the sight of God. It is the way of truth and it is the way of freedom. True freedom in a life of Christ is freedom from the opposite of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Think for a moment what those opposites are. The opposite of forgiveness is holding on to anger and bitterness over an offense of some kind. Paul here in his letter was asking Philemon to forgive rather than continue to punish with hate and anger.

To punish or get revenge on someone who has offended you might feel good for a moment, but in the long run, forgiveness is healing not only to the one who is forgiven but also to the one who forgives.

A LOAD BEING LIFTED

This type of true freedom results in a feeling that a load is being lifted off your back. A load of grudges can weigh you down. People can be shackled or imprisoned emotionally but also physically, too. Your whole body feels free when you can forgive. But that doesn't mean justice should not be done at the same time.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

True Freedom from bitterness and hate is the basis of the message Paul was sending to Philemon. Forgiveness and reconciliation are powerful for healing from the pain inflicted from being victimized in a crime. Onesimus was a robber or a cheat of some kind who offended Philemon. Maybe he owed Philemon a debt he couldn't pay back, and he ran away rather than being a debtor slave who has to work it off. Forgive us our debts... But Paul convinced Philemon that the whole community would be better off if he could treat Onesimus as an equal and even as a brother and forgive him for his offense. Another name for this is Restorative Justice.

There is a movement in our schools and in our prisons to promote Restorative Justice.

(A video about Restorative Justice was shown to the congregation.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iq554Oxc8js>

FORGIVING

Paul was promoting the idea of being forgiving and reconciling in all your relationships. Love your neighbor doesn't mean just your next-door neighbor. It means even the neighbor that offends you, because vengeance often leads to more violence which causes an unending cycle.

In a Trauma and Healing class I took in seminary, they had us read a case study of a mother who forgave her daughter's murderer. It was so hard for me to believe she could fully forgive him, but she did and was so grateful for the chance to help restore the life of the person who murdered her daughter, even though he is in jail for life. He cried and apologized for being high on drugs at the time and said he had lost his soul, but her forgiveness helped him find it again. He owned his responsibility and was remorseful.

THE REDEMPTION PROJECT

The Redemption Project was a series on CNN about the same kind of restorative justice cases. It featured an Oakland murder of a young woman in a drive by gang shooting and how her father forgave the shooter twenty years later. You can find the videos on CNN.com.

There is one case in the CNN series where a young gang member still could not "own" his part in a person's death and the mother said she wasn't ready to forgive until he expressed sincere remorse.

The second half of our fall Adult Education presentation is about American Hate with stories of survivors who speak out about being targeted for their faith or their skin color. It concludes with a chapter titled: "Hope in a Time of Despair." All the personal stories end with suggestions for ways to prevent future hate and violence. Hate is a public health issue and our government should treat it like one with research and effective prevention of violence efforts like we do to prevent other diseases.

WRITE YOUR OWN LETTER

I hope you will remember the lessons in the letter to Philemon and consider writing your own letter promoting forgiveness and reconciliation in your life.

Take a moment now and ponder who you need to forgive.

Plan to attend the Dietrich Bonhoeffer and American Hate classes on Mondays and Wednesdays. The more we work for forgiveness and reconciliation the more we are walking in the Way of Jesus. Amen



**Benediction:
As Paul would say to Philemon and
to us:
May the grace of the Lord Jesus
Christ be with your Spirit. Amen**

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