

The Path to Forgiveness

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[0 : 0 0] now if you could keep your bible bible open and your bible handy uh because i do i do want to take this uh book of philemon and typically what somebody would do is maybe choose a verse and talk to about that but i don't want to do that today i just want to take the whole letter as one thing because i think there's there's real benefit in doing that but as background over the last few years um i i do take services from time to time and i've been working my way through the book of colossians and i actually finished it in january in in one of the city groups um and chapter four the the last chapter of colossians is a nice way to end that book it it's a list of names it's a list of people um and it's got this underlying message all the way through it that people matter that everyone regardless of of their gender their background their age their history good or bad their nationality the color of their skin um the gifts and the nature of gifts they have has a role in the church and that role can be even the most insignificant of roles can have the most material impact on the life of the church and i kind of came to the end of colossians and i couldn't quite decide where where to go next uh kind of felt a bit lost because i've been doing it for so long i didn't know where to go but there's one name right at the end of in that list of names in colossians chapter four if you're quick and you can turn to it quickly chapter four in verse nine and with him onesimus our faithful and beloved brother who is one of you they will tell you of everything that has taken place here um so this man that onesimus is mentioned in philemon he was first mentioned in colossians and we know from that he's from colossi we know he's been with paul in rome but he's coming home now we know that onesimus is a faithful and dear brother and we know that he's lots of news about paul that he wants to tell the church in colossi but when we turn to this book of philemon we see that there's so much more to onesimus coming home um onesimus he was a runaway slave and if you look at verse 18 of philemon there's a suggestion there uh that just maybe he had stole from philemon before he ran away eventually he ended up in rome and it would have been a tough existence for him there there would there would have been the constant fear of being caught he would have had to to live probably on the edges of society probably with many others who had done the same thing and with all all the distrust and confusion and difficulty that comes in that sort of environment he would have had to have have avoided bounty hunters which existed even then and the punishment that could have come his way could have been severe we read of situations of runaway stays being branded beaten and even crucified um but in that existence somehow he came into contact with paul uh and through paul's witness he he came to faith and in the most amazing of providences which you've all realized by now the man he had run away from and probably stolen from was philemon and philemon and his family um since probably since he had run away were were pillars of the church in his hometown it was assumed um that appiah was his wife and an archipus was his son but we're not entirely certain of that um the church met in his house and between the fact that philemon had slaves and the church met met in his house you can probably conclude that he was fairly wealthy and well to do um we also know from from this

letter that he's a good man from all that paul says all the encouraging and lovely things but he was also a man who was in a bit of a spot because of this letter uh that had been delivered to him it was deeply personal and paul even wrote the letter himself which he didn't always do it was a letter that was believer to believer it was brother to brother but at the same time it was no private letter it was meant to be read to the church in colossi and it was preserved for history for for the likes of us to to talk about it and to understand it and it's essentially at its core it's it's a letter about christian love and forgiveness and and make no mistake philemon was being asked a lot here he had been deserted he'd be probably been robbed he had been cheated he had been embarrassed by this man and not only was he being asked to have him back but he was a welcome and back with open arms and give him a royal welcome in the process and i think if it took this book book as a whole

there's it has a lot to say about love and forgiveness but i want to want to highlight three things about love and forgiveness and the first one is a question about why we should forgive and and the first reason for this is that we are forgiven people if if we believe if if our faith is genuine as real we are forgiven people but in our sinfulness uh we just cannot fully comprehend just how big a thing it is to be able to have that forgiveness because in our sinfulness we can't see sin as god sees it but the bible is full of descriptive words for it it talks about rebellion it talks about being corrupt talks about self-deceit it talks about sin being something that defiles us it's lawlessness it's scarlet as opposed to white it's a sickness it's a darkness as opposed to light it's unfaithfulness it's a transgression it's a weakness it's desolation it's uncleanness um and so many more things and it affects everything no part of your being is unaffected and i'm going to read uh just some some some verses just a verse from or two verses from isaiah chapter one and verse five and six because it goes to this point about our sin why will you be struck down why will you continue to rebel the whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint from the sole of the foot even to the head there's no soundness in it but bruises and sores and raw wounds they are not pressed up or bound out or softened with oil and what that what that does in isaiah it says that from the from your head to your toe inside and out you are a corrupt and sinful human being in every way and so in depth and so pervasive is our sin that it means we break all of god's commands all of the time and yet we know that if god forgiven us that the price was very high it was his son he was sent to this earth he lived in humble conditions he was rejected and treated cruelly by by his own people he even had the opposition of his family from time at times it was ultimately the crucifixion um and it was that taking the punishment for all our sins despite the fact that none of them he was responsible for and it was that separation of father and son that he had so we've all sinned and we all sinned big style and what we say what we do what we think what we don't do what we don't say and so on yet god in his mercy has forgiven us and if god has done that for us then we must be forgiving of the sins against us because whatever

it is no matter how badly you've been wronged it will not be as bad as your sins against your heavenly father perhaps you've been rude perhaps you've been careless in your behavior maybe insensitive you've hurt somebody physically or emotionally even the worst of sins be it neglect abuse or worse but remember you've done all these things to your heavenly father and more so if god has forgiven you then you must extend this the same forgiveness to others who have done so much less wrong to you the second element of this we are commanded to forgive and i'll not go into this in detail um but the sixth commandment forbids killing and if you go to the sermon of the mount it's shown there that the commandment is much wider than the physical act or the planning that goes into that it goes to how you think it goes to how you feel about someone and as a result the failure to forgive will fall into the scope of that commandment the lord's prayer as well for example it says you'll forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and you'll find if if you do a search and you put forgiveness in into some search engine and you type type it in you'll find many many verses on forgiveness but not anywhere will you find a verse which says it's wrong to forgive we forgive because we have been forgiven we forgive because we have been commanded to forgive and we forgive because it's good for everyone and this does follow on from from what i've said before but a true spirit of forgiveness is good for all and when you think about it our lives are a whole series of different relationships it can be a marriage it can be a family it can be within the church it can be our work lives or in amongst our neighbors it's the clubs where members offer the voluntary work we do and so on and in every one of them we will make mistakes or we will come up short in some way so we will all need forgiveness all of the time and we'll need it a lot more than what we think we do and i mentioned earlier and it could be something it could be something a thoughtlessness and oversight it could be a tough decision that you have to make where you make the wrong call it could be something where whatever you do somebody's going to get hurt um and it could be something so much worse or deliberate like what anesimus did but the point is we all need forgiveness all of the time and if we fail to do that look what happens disputes develop they fester and they grow there's a suspicion between people that are involved sometimes it grows to hostility and a desire for retribution or getting even or maybe even in the worst of the cases that you want to get ahead of the game and settle the dispute once and for all it creates an undercurrent that whatever situation that causes it that it's uncomfortable for everyone to be in and around and maybe you might force people to take sides when that's wrong to do it has an impact on the people involved they can't move on and it damages them the person feeling wrong holds a grudge which eats away at them the person who is at fault uh can can never put right that wrong so they can't put it behind them they

can't move on they can't fix a relationship or put it on a solid footing yet you only have to look at the news each day to see um to see that you know you hear from my accent you all know where i'm from and there's many communities in northern ireland people think there's just two but there's many but they haven't got on for hundreds of years um and what's happening now in the community that i

grew up in is that it is splintering as well and because even within the one community they can't get on and look what it caused you turn on the news and you look at israel and gaza and you say why didn't abraham just wait for god look at the trouble that he has caused and it's still going on today centuries of hate and this uh hate and conflict and and so on and look where it's got and we see it in churches as well and what it does is it damages the internal workings of the church and as a result it damages the work that the church seeks to do as well however more important than that is a failure to forgive damages our relationship with god himself uh we touched on it earlier but if we don't forgive we're breaking one of god's law and commands and that immediately puts up a blocker in our relationship with god and when we do that it stunts our spiritual growth and gets in the way and blocks that relationship even more and in effect what we are actually saying is that we know better than god when we fail to forgive and that god's standards are lower than ours and there are real consequences for that and if and if you want to know the consequences um look at the parable of of the unforgiving servant it's a very salutary lesson the master servant had been given them had been forgiven a massive debt it had been totally written off but when it when he failed to do the same but he wouldn't forgive the debt of people who who owed him so much wealth who owed him so much less matthew 18 verse 34 and 35 tells us and in anger his master delivered to him the jailers until he should pay all his debt so also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart we are required to forgive second point i want to raise about about this letter philemon is it tells you that sometimes it can be really hard to forgive um and and sometimes you need a helping hand um i'll not go into it but anesimus yes he he he was the wrongdoer in this case but he had also been wronged himself he had been kept in slavery um and it feels particularly bad because there's two christian men involved in this um but he needed help he had forgive he had forgiveness to do because of of of the servitude he had been kept in and paul gave him help he sent him with tycchus we know that from colossians who was an outstanding christian man trusted and loved for it trusted and loved by everybody but he also sent him with this letter to ease the past so so anesimus needed help and he got it philemon i think needed more help than this he had been wronged he had been deserted he had been stolen from probably he had the embarrassment but in addition to that so the act of forgiveness was very tough for him uh you know he had a difficult decision on how to handle this you know think about it what would his other slaves do what would be the impact on on the church given the social norms of the time if he was too soft he would have brought attention to himself and the church in an unhelpful and probably damaging way for for them and too hard he would have he would have failed in his responsibility forgive and he was put in a really tough spot here and he needed help on this journey of forgiveness that we all might need at times and paul's guidance here it's a real master class in how to help somebody through that journey he's both sensitive and tactful but he's also bold he also has subtle threats reminders of responsibilities and it's a real sort of carrot and stick type of type of arrangement where he both sets out the good reasons for doing what he should do but also pokes him with a big stick to just keep him honest as well and how does he do that well he does various things he talks firstly about philemon's faith and his thankfulness for his faith he says about his great pleasure about philemon's love for god and god's people he commands him for the effectiveness of his witness and the way that he helps others and you can see where it's going he builds it up and he builds it up and then he hits it with them in verse 8 where he said i want you to have onesimus back with all the forgiveness that involves i'll go back to what i said earlier because what paul has done in his very subtle way is saying you're a christian now it's your responsibility forgive for your own good for onesimus's good and for the good of the church that you're both part of the next thing he does is he calls in personal favors philemon owes him a debt after all and the debt that philemon owes him was it was his place in heaven because philemon had become a christian through paul's witness to him in the same way as inesimus ad paul also highlights the sacrifice that he is making he's losing a man that was his his son a tremendous help to him in the most difficult of circumstances because paul was an old man now and he was in prison his life of service had weighed heavily on him and it was hard and getting and losing onesimus was going to be a tough call for paul paul also offered to settle the debt um that philemon had suffered and that would have been no easy easy promise for

paul to make because the loss was probably considerable and it's bound to put a little pressure on philemon to say because what sort of man would have held paul good to make this debt given his age his circumstances in prison his seniority within the church um what sort of man would have made paul hold good his promise here and then the final one that almost makes me laugh well it does make me laugh look at verse 22 um at the same time prepare a guest for me for i am hoping that through your prayers i will be graciously given to you and the reason why this makes me laugh is because when i was in school there was there was three types of homework there was the homework that you're given that the teacher was never going to mark there's the touch there's the homework that you did that your buddies marked for you and there's a homework you did that your teacher took in and marked for you and what paul is saying is i expect to get out of prison and i expect to come to your house and you know what i'm going to be there to check up on you this is and not only was he going to check his homework but he was going to come to his house to do it paul wasn't just sending them his letter to get on with it he was he was giving them ongoing help because the ask was hard he needed ongoing support and that's what paul was going to give him and the final thing final point is that from that i want to call out of this letter there's many more but love and forgiveness it's a powerful transformational force and there's a bit of a problem in this book there's a big elephant in the room and up to now i've kind of skirted around it um but it's impossible to ignore it and the big elephant in the room is slavery philemon a fine christian man owned slaves and what paul was doing was sending onesimus back and to get back into that it's an uncomfortable feeling if we read it properly so that i think as a church what we should do is slavery is not okay i understand that it's a very

[20 : 11] complicated issue um i understand that there's many types of slavery and i also understand somebody with history degree that you should never judge history through through modern eyes but at the same time uh we cannot be over we cannot over complicate it let's call out slavery for what it is it's evil it's odious it it pulls people's dignity away and it's unbiblical in every way and i'll not ask you to to to look them up but just a few verses genesis 1 27 so god created man in his own image in the image of god he created him male and female he created them proverbs 22 verse 2 the rich and the poor meet together the lord is the maker of them all mark 12 verse 30 and 31 this is where jesus has asked what's the most important commandment and he says the first most important commandment is is to love the lord but the second one he said is love your neighbor as yourself and think about this you're a parent of young children but you don't own them your master owns them in this slavery situation slavery is not okay um all these verses that i've read i talk about equality you talk about treating people properly understanding their equality before god so slavery is not okay you can also look at exodus chapter 21 and i think you notice there is there's a guy to regulate slavery but it doesn't endorse it it talks about the master-slave relationships about um how masters must slave teach their slaves properly but slaves are to behave and respect their masters it puts limitations on as to who you can go into slavery and who can't uh it creates limitations on how long they can be in slavery unless they choose to stay in it and it also gives them a way to get out of it should they want to do that and at various other points in the bible it gives just punishments of people break these guidelines and rules but never once does the bible endorse slavery um it's not an endorsement and lazy research sometimes you don't have to look too hard to find it but they but they say that the bible does and they also point to to to the christian tradition which is not good in this respect we have christian titans like like jonathan edwards and and george whitfield who owned their own slaves we in the case of george whitfield he he actually campaigned to have slavery reintroduced in the colony of georgia and he was successful in that but slavery is a morally repugnant thing let me read some some words of of john wesley are you a man then you should have a human heart but have you indeed what is your heart made of is there no such principle as compassion there do you never feel another's pain have you no sympathy no sense of human woe no pity for the miserable when you saw the flowing eyes the heaving breasts the bleeding sides and tortured limbs of your fellow creatures was your was you was you a stone or a brute do you look upon them with the eyes of a tiger when you squeeze the agonizing creatures down into the ship or when you threw their poor mangled remains into the sea have you no relenting did not one tear drop from your eye or one sigh escape from your breast do you feel no relenting now if you do not you must go on till the measure of your iniquities is full then the great god will deal with you read a bit more let none of you by his own act indeed by his own voluntary choice away with all the

whips all chains all compulsion be gentle towards men and see that you invariably do unto everyone as you as um as um as you would be uh would be done unto you very few people knew better about this so slavery it's wrong and it's still happening 2022 17 000 people in the uk um identified as potential slavery victims 50 million people worldwide at the minute um are in situations akin to slavery and yet what do we see paul doing he sends him back into it and there's another verse in the bible it's in deuteronomy chapter 23 and verse 15 you shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you this is the big elephant in the room that paul is sending him back to this odious and horrible thing um can't hard to get your hand head around it it doesn't sit so well and why does paul do it well i'll try and answer this as best i can well sometimes we live in circumstances in the world where it's not perfect sometimes uh we have to make choices in the context of a sinful world where it's the least worst choice that we can do and sometimes you just can't change the world uh and sometimes it might do more than harm good if we tried too hard and i think this might have been the situation here because it's estimated that 30 percent of the population in the roman empire were slaves um and if you had abolished immediately there would there would have been an economic and social fallout that would have been a catastrophe for the people and a catastrophe for the empire so it needs tact and sensitivity and how we deal with this thing and this is what paul is doing he creates a master class and what it is and what it shows us is how do we deal with it we deal with it by love and forgiveness monesimus he says i'm coming back i'm sorry um i'm here to put it right i'm here to show you my love um philemon arms arms open welcomes him back but not as a slave but as a beloved brother and note the economic and power relationship with slavery hasn't gone away here it's still there but love and forgiveness has overpowered it and replaced it and replaced it with something much more powerful something so much better something fair something good and something wonderful and that is where i want to finish um we don't know if philemon followed through on this letter but it's hard to believe that he didn't um and love and forgiveness what it tells us yes it's a powerful force it's one that even the most odious and dysfunctional situations that it can't stand against it it's and it's also we live in a world that badly needs it we see broken homes we see broken societies we see hate we see wars we see all these things and people aren't and people are crying out for love and forgiveness and we should be the ones to bring it to them but we have to start here that's the final message we have to start in the church because we can't tell people what to do if we're not doing it ourselves so start start here but but let's bring it out uh to to the world at large and and um i've lost it but there was there was one more thing that that i wanted to read

um one of my favorite people i've quoted her here before and i'm sure i'll quote her again corrie ten boom she met one of the prison guards from from her concentration camp he came up to her at a meeting and he asked for her forgiveness and she was struggling and this is a quote from her book *jesus helped me* i prayed silently i can lift my hand i i can do that much you supply the feeling and so woodenly mechanically i thrust my hand and into the one stretched out to me that's the prison guard as i did it an incredible thing took place the current started in my shoulder raced down sorry raced down my arm sprang into our joined hands and then this healing warmth seemed to flood through my own being bringing tears to my eyes i forgive you brother i cried amen