



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Forgiven Much? Forgive Much!

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PHILEMON 15-17

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What is true Christianity all about? What does it really mean to follow Jesus Christ? Those are incredibly important questions, and seeking the answers is the main reason for our studies here in the capitol.

When asked those questions, most will say that Christianity is all about being a good person, going to church, or giving to charity. They believe that following Christ involves trying to live like Jesus did in loving and serving others. Many understand the Christian faith to be mainly about morals, rules, and standards. (This is particularly true of life here in the capitol.) While all those things are true, they are not the whole story.

The message of the Christian faith is that there are indeed morals, rules, and standards that God has given us. Each one of us has broken God's laws and are in need of forgiveness which He has provided for us through Christ. Once we experience that forgiveness through faith in what Christ has done, then our lives are changed as we seek to follow Him. Nowhere is this change more evident than in our willingness to forgive others.

Amazingly, the little letter of Philemon actually points us to this central truth of the Christian faith.

NOTHING IS NEARER THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN FAITH THAN THE RECOGNITION OF OUR OWN NEED TO FORGIVE BECAUSE OF OUR OWN NEED FOR FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST.¹

In our introductory study we saw that one of the reasons for studying Paul's letter to Philemon is due to the importance of the subject of forgiveness. Let's consider this by looking at how God's word teaches us about forgiveness through principle, parable, and example. (I encourage you once again to take a few minutes to read through the letter of Philemon.)

THE BIBLE'S TEACHING ON FORGIVENESS

PRINCIPLE OF FORGIVENESS

Jesus' own words lays out for us the principles regarding forgiveness. Actually, He was quite pointed in His teaching. In the Lord's Prayer He encouraged us to pray, "...*Forgive us our*

debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). However He does not stop there. He goes on, "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (vs. 14-15).

Jesus repeats this principle again when Peter asks Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22) Jesus closes His powerful parable with these words: "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

The principle is that if indeed we have forgiven much, we are to forgive others much. The "seventy times seven" does not mean we are to keep a tally and once we reach 490 we no longer have to forgive. It is a figure of speech that means we must always be ready to forgive if we understand how much God has forgiven us.

Paul lays out clearly the principle of forgiveness as well. Some comment how the letter of Philemon is absent of any doctrinal or theological teaching which is so common to the rest of Paul's letters. We must remember though that Philemon is a personal letter accompanying Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. In Colossians we find tremendous teaching regarding who Christ is and what He has done for us. We also find a clear statement regarding forgiveness:

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Colossians 3:12-13

Paul gives us the same principle. We are to forgive others because of how much Christ has forgiven us. This follows Paul's teaching on the forgiveness we have through Christ and His work on our behalf:

BIBLE STUDIES

LOBBYIST / STAFF STUDY: **TUESDAYS, 12:00 NOON**, TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

LEGISLATOR / ELECTED OFFICIAL STUDIES: **THURSDAYS 8:00 A.M. & NOON** TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

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...He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:13-14²

Philemon may not contain Paul's usual pattern of teaching gospel truth and then laying out the actions that result from it. But when we remember that is a companion letter to Colossians we see that it indeed is a bold call for believers to live out the truth he taught in his letter to the church at Colossae.

PARABLE OF FORGIVENESS

In Matthew 18:21-35 Jesus gives a powerful parable to illustrate the principle of forgiveness. (I encourage you to take the time to read this passage.) In it he describes a king who decided to settle up accounts with his servants. One was brought before him who owed him a huge amount of money which he had no hope of ever repaying. The king had compassion and forgave the servant the huge debt. This servant then went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a small amount and demanded to be repaid. Though he begged, the first servant would not relent and had the poor fellow thrown in to prison. When the king heard of this, he challenged the wicked servant with these words:

"...Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?" (vs. 33). He then had the slave punished until he should repay the debt. Jesus concludes his parable with the pointed words, **"My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."** (vs. 35).

There is some debate as to whether this means that someone who is unwilling to forgive is actually not a genuine believer, that their sins are not forgiven. A person who can continue in an attitude of anger and unforgiveness certainly does not understand the truth of their own great sinfulness before God. One pastor puts it quite strongly:

"One way to lose heaven is to hold fast to an unforgiving spirit and so prove that we have never been indwelt by the Spirit of Christ." If we hold fast to an unforgiving spirit, we will not be forgiven by God. If we continue on in that way, then we will not go to heaven, because heaven is the dwelling place of forgiven people. The reason is not

because we can earn heaven or merit heaven by forgiving others, but because holding fast to an unforgiving spirit proves that we do not trust Christ. If we trust him, we will not spurn his way of life. If we trust him, we will not be able to take forgiveness from his hand for our million dollar debt and withhold it from our ten dollar debtor.³

At the very least it means that one who is a follower of Christ will find their fellowship with God severely hindered by an unforgiving heart.

EXAMPLE OF FORGIVENESS

It is often said that we learn any skill or activity best by following someone's example. Forgiving others and seeking forgiveness from others is central to the Christian life. It is also very difficult to practice. For this reason God gives us a vivid example to follow in Paul's letter to Philemon. In verses 15-17 Paul writes:

For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no 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. If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. 15-17

Philemon is strongly encouraged to forgive Onesimus and accept him as a brother. Though it is not explicitly stated, Paul links Philemon's forgiveness to that which he himself had found in Christ.

CONCLUSION

Our forgiveness of others is based upon the forgiveness we have in Christ. We must recognize the great debt each of us owes God because of our sin and that it can be forgiven through faith in Christ and what He has done for us. When we understand that we have been forgiven much, then we will forgive much.

¹ Dever, Mark (2005-11-30). *The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept* (p. 406). Good News Publishers/Crossway Books. Kindle Edition.

² We should note that Ephesians which is also closely related to Colossians and Philemon also teaches the same principle. See Ephesians 1:7 & 4:31-32.

³ Piper, John. *As We Forgive our Debtors*. Sermon March 20, 1994. www.desiringgod.org