

**Text: Philemon**

**Theme: Series-Jonah and the Lord Suffering God: A Lesson on Forgiveness**

**Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 13/03/2016 at 10.30am**

If there is any human quality that makes man in any sense resemble God, it is forgiveness. In **Exodus 34:6-7a**, God is described as compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. In **Proverbs 19:11**, we read, “A person’s wisdom yields patience; it is to one’s glory to overlook an offense”. We saw in our study of Genesis how God forgave Abraham, over and over again because of His covenant with him. And in Genesis 15, the story of the prodigal son, we see God depicted as the gracious father, who ran towards the returning son and embraced him. Such forgiveness was misunderstood and unappreciated as shown by the elder son and perhaps the people in the local setting but God did it anyway because that is just Him. God is a forgiving God, and if you belong to Him, you are to be forgiving people. In Matthew 18:22, Jesus told Peter that he should forgive as many times as possible and the parable that follows depicts God as a generous Forgive.

Colossians 3:13 and Ephesians 4:32 talk about forgiveness as a general principle of living, echoing the statement of our Lord Jesus in the prayer He taught his disciples: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. As we come to the book of **Philemon, we see Forgiveness in action, not in principle as Col. 3:13 and Ephesians 4:32 show, or in a parable, as we read in Matthew 15 (The prodigal son) and Matthew 18 (The unmerciful servant).**

Philemon shows us **1. The character of forgiveness (The What); 2. Forgiveness in action (The How) and 3. Motivation of forgiveness (The Why).** Let us go into the book and unravel what it has in store for us.

This brief letter was written by Paul during his Roman imprisonment described in Acts 28:30-31. There are some that believe he wrote it from the time of imprisonment in Ephesus, but this is an unlikely possibility. As always, Paul did not consider himself a prisoner of Rome, of circumstances, or of the religious leaders who started his legal troubles (Acts 23-24). Paul saw himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ, because if Christ had not allowed his imprisonment, it would be futile for anyone to put him there. He saw his obedience to preach the gospel of Christ as the reason why he was in chains and also an opportunity to proclaim the same good news to those who would not have heard were he not in chains! What a Christ like mindset!

The principal characters in the book are Paul, Onesimus (a runaway slave belonging to Philemon), Philemon (Paul’s friend and possibly convert) and Jesus Christ, who though not mentioned, the Character that gives the entire real story its meaning and flavour. Paul's friendship with Philemon is shown by something significantly missing in his greeting. Of the 13 letters Paul wrote to churches or individuals, in 9 of them he called himself an apostle in the opening verse. In this letter (along with Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians), Paul appealed to his reader more as a friend and less an apostle.

### **The character of Forgiveness (The What).**

A forgiven person according to Jesus Christ is expected to forgive others, otherwise, there is no evidence that he had been forgiven in the first place. One preacher once said that “you don’t have to go to heaven to find the assurance of your being forgiven by God, if you have the mindset to forgive others securely operating in your heart, you have got your answer.” Paul was a runaway prisoner of some sort. He was determined to destroy the Christian faith and ultimately Jesus Christ. He was lost and spiritually, he was running on empty until he met

Jesus Christ. **Jesus gave Paul His full plate in place of Paul's empty one.** The grace of Jesus covered his sins and His peace was the result. Christ pleaded before God on Paul's behalf; receive him as though you were receiving me. All that he owed, my blood will pay it all. Write it to my account. And God hearkened to Jesus Christ, and Paul was liberated and became a useful instrument in the hands of The Lord. We can see the same drama being unfolded here. Forgiveness, Christ said, must give birth to forgiveness of others. Forgiveness is an attribute of God, and must be the attribute of believers in Christ Jesus. By forgiving others, we show how much we appreciate what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

#### **Verses 4-7**

Paul prayed for Philemon, desiring that the sharing of his faith would become effective as Philemon understood the work God did in him. This is the foundation for all effective evangelism: the overflow of a life touched and changed by God. The reason why some sharing of the faith is not effective is because we don't know or can't communicate every good thing God has done for us. "The apostle speaks here of the works of charity in which Philemon abounded toward poor Christians." (Clarke). Is Paul trying to gently lead to the purpose of his writing? Maybe, but we can see how considerate he is.

#### **Forgiveness in action (The How)**

##### **Verses 8-16**

A loving appeal is often better than an authoritative command. Paul wasn't hesitant to command when the situation demanded it (1 Corinthians 5:4-5), but in wisdom he knew when to use the loving appeal.

Onesimus was an escaped slave who escaped from his master Philemon. It seems that when Onesimus escaped, he fled to Rome and - intentionally or not - met with Paul. Paul, though under house arrest by the Romans, led Onesimus to faith in Jesus Christ (whom I have begotten while in my chains). Onesimus met the man who had led his master Philemon to Jesus (Philemon 19).

When Paul made this appeal on behalf of Onesimus, he followed deep traditions in Roman culture. There was an ancient Greek law (inherited by the Romans) allowing any escaped slave sanctuary at an altar. The altar could even be the hearth of a private family home; then the head of the family was obliged to give the slave protection while he tried to persuade him to return to his master. If the slave refused, the head of the family would put the slave up for auction and give the price for the slave to the former master. Paul gave Onesimus protection, and now was working the issue out with Philemon.

When Paul spoke of Onesimus being useless (v.11) and useful, he made a play on a word. **The name Onesimus means profitable, or useful. Now that he was a Christian, Onesimus could live up to his name.** "It is significant to note that Paul claims that in Christ the useless person has been made useful." (W. Barclay)

##### **(12-14)**

I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart: Onesimus had done something wrong in that he escaped from his master. It was time to set that right, so Paul was willing to send him back. Yet Paul obviously wanted Philemon to deal gently with Onesimus. Under Roman law the slave owner had complete and total control over his slave. It wasn't unusual for slaves to be crucified for lesser offenses than escaping.

Paul "re-introduced" Onesimus to Philemon; not as a slave, but as a brother. In this relationship as brothers and not slaves, Paul effectively abolished the sting of the "master-slave" relationship and laid the foundation for the eventual legal abolition of slavery. If a man is a stranger, I might make him my slave. But how can my brother be my slave? This breaking

of the distinction between master and slave was an absolutely revolutionary development. It did far more to change society than the passing of a law prohibiting slavery.

**(17-19)** Paul's personal promise of restitution towards Philemon.

If then you count me as a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. Apparently when Onesimus escaped he also stole from Philemon. This in itself was a capital crime. Paul asked that the value of what had been stolen be "charged" to Paul's account. "Put it on my tab, Philemon." I will repay it; not to mention that you owe me your very self.

Paul's appeal is powerful because he stood beside a guilty man and said to the owner of the slave, "I know this man is a criminal and deserves punishment. Yet this slave is my friend, so if you punish him punish me also. I stand beside him to take his punishment." Paul lays himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleads his cause with his master, and so sets himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father.

**Motivation of forgiveness (The Why).**

**Verses 20-22. Paul's confidence in Philemon's response.**

Philemon is presented as a picture of a forgiven sinner. We owe our very self to God, so we should not hold forgiveness back to another. If we are partners with Christ and God, we should forgive as we have been forgiven.

Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

Let me have joy from you in the Lord: Joy is more literally profit. It translates the ancient Greek word *oninemi*, the root word for the name "Onesimus." Paul used another play on words and the name Onesimus to communicate a not so subtle request: **"Let me have Onesimus back from you in the Lord."**