

# Philemon: When Sin Happens

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A few years ago, my wife and I, along with a few of our friends, got to have lunch with one of my heroes in the faith, Dr. Bruce Ware. He is a professor at Southern Seminary; so of course, I bring a list of questions to ask Dr. Ware. If you have ever been around one of your heroes, you want to ask them as much as possible. So I am drilling him with question after question. Then while I take a breath to think of my next question, I hear my wife ask him, "What his favorite marriage book?" Right as she asked that question, I was thinking that was a good question. Why didn't I think of the question? What a great question to ask Dr. Ware! It was better than all of mine combined. Without hesitation, he said his favorite marriage book was, What Did You Expect?, by Paul Tripp. So as we left lunch that day, I got out my phone and ordered that book immediately. As soon as it came in, I read the entire thing. If Dr. Bruce Ware says this is the greatest book on marriage, this is the one I wanted to read. In the book, he really tries to change our paradigm on marriage. What do we expect when we get married? He says for most of us, when we get married we expect the person we are marrying to make us happy. That is why we get married—to be fulfilled and to be happy. I see all the time in pre-marriage counseling. There are two starry-eyed people and sitting across from each other. They are looking at each other; the girl is thinking this guy is so cute! He is going to make me happy. The guy is thinking this girl is so pretty! She is

going to make me happy. Each of them selfishly goes into marriage so that the other one can make them (individually) happy, so it is a very selfish motive. And then usually, once we get married, this little three letter word called, *sin*, happens. All of a sudden, it blows us away because we never would have expected the person we are marrying to sin, to mess up, because they are supposed to make us happy. And now they are not making us happy; they are actually making us very angry. So the book helps us to change our expectation of marriage. He gives us a new expectation, a new purpose, for marriage. It is not our individual happiness, but instead, it is our collective holiness; it is sanctification. The reality is that you still sin and your spouse still sins. But God has brought us together in marriage, not to fight against one another, but to fight for one another to put sin to death together so we can both grow in holiness. And holiness will produce a home full of happiness. So it is a new expectation. It is not that this person is going to be perfect and make you happy; it is this person will sin and God has brought you into their life to help out when they sin, to fight for them instead of against them.

I think some of us had the same expectations for the church, the same expectations for the faith family. We come into this church because we think now that we are in Christ the faith family will make us happy. Everyone is here for your individual happiness. That is why you come to church, so that all of your brothers and sisters can make you happy; that is your expectation.

## **Response to Sin**

I want to try to flip that expectation a little bit. The goal of this church is not your individual happiness. Instead, the goal of this church is for our collective holiness, our collective sanctification. This may be mind-altering, but if you are a member of this body, if you are attending this church, I want you to know that we still sin. But guess what? So do you. We sin and you sin, so the expectation is that sin is going to happen. It is going to come up, so when somebody wrongs you or sin against you, it shouldn't be

shocking. When sin happens, you shouldn't fight against them because of their sin, instead, you should think of how you can fight for them so you can work through it. You can put it to death and still be unified and grow in holiness and sanctification. The more we put sin to death and the more we produce holiness and sanctification, the more happiness will come as a body together. So with this new perspective, I want you to assume that sin is going to happen. Someone is going to sin against you and you will sin against someone, it is going to happen.

So what do you do when sin happens? What is your response? In Philemon, we find a situation of a brother who sinned against another brother and we are going to see what you are to do when sin happens. There is only one chapter. Our Scripture text will be verses 8-22. Paul has just addressed Philemon and the house church in his house. He talked about Philemon's faith as well as the many good things about him.

## **Scripture**

***"Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you***

***consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.”***

## **Paul’s Appeal to Philemon**

- **Onesimus sins against Philemon**

First, we are just going to go through the letter and see what is going on in it. The first thing we notice is that Onesimus sinned against Philemon. Paul says in verse 8, “*Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required...yet I prefer to appeal...*” What is that, what is he bold enough to command but instead decides to appeal? The thing he is bold enough to say Philemon must do, but will instead ask him to do is to forgive. He is appealing for his child Onesimus. We see from the letter that Onesimus was a bondservant of Philemon. Onesimus would have been in Philemon’s household. Philemon was his master; he worked for Philemon. So they had that relationship, but something went wrong. Onesimus did something to Philemon, and we are not sure what he did. Paul didn’t tell us, he didn’t give us the details. We just know that Onesimus sinned against Philemon.

So why doesn’t Paul give the details of what happened? I think one reason is that Onesimus and Philemon both knew what Onesimus did, so Paul didn’t have to spell it out. I think the reason God didn’t reveal it to others is because if He had told us exactly what Onesimus did to Philemon, then we might justify a reason why we don’t have to forgive someone for what they

do to against us. For example, let's say Onesimus had stolen from Philemon. You might say that you could forgive someone who had stolen from you, but what 'so and so' did to you is different; that is a different category, a different kind of sin, so you don't have to forgive them. Onesimus' sin was different and easy to forgive; you don't know what this person did to me! So I think one of the reasons God leaves the details out is so we can't say we would forgive that but we are not going to forgive this. He doesn't want us to justify away why we don't have to forgive. Instead, He is going to appeal to us why we should forgive for the sake of the gospel.

- **Onesimus finds Paul**

So Onesimus sins against his master and he runs away. He is a fugitive. He goes from Colossae to Rome, running away from the sin he had committed against Philemon. And then the next thing we find is that Jesus has saved Onesimus! Paul tells us he became a father to him in his imprisonment, he said, "*Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.*" I love this! Onesimus is a fugitive in Rome, and he is probably thinking he is home free. (I have made it! I am in Rome now, no one will find me; I have run away from my problem!) And guess who he runs into...I mean of all people in Rome, Onesimus runs into the Apostle Paul! Think about it; you just sinned against your master, you are running away, you are home free in a foreign country, and then you meet a guy named Paul. What luck is that? But Paul begins to share the gospel with Onesimus. We see that he receives the gospel because Paul uses this language of becoming a father to him, literally meaning, 'I gave birth to him.' Paul shared the gospel with him and he became a believer. Paul wants us to see what happens when someone gets saved; this transformation that takes place in Onesimus' life. The text says formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful to you. It is a play on words in the Greek, and it also works in the English. He went from useless to useful. That is what happens when you become a believer in Jesus Christ. You move from being useless, you are harming people, you are

living for your sin, your world, and you are leaving destruction in your wake. You are harming everyone in your way. You are not serving people; you are serving yourself. You are wreaking havoc for you and all those around you. That is who Onesimus was, he was useless, harming his master, and living a life that was going to harm all kinds of other people because he was only concerned about himself. But then something happens; Jesus saves Onesimus, and he goes from being useless to useful. Onesimus would not serve his master Philemon, and he was supposed to. And now Onesimus is freely serving Paul, in his imprisonment, and the sake of the gospel. Onesimus, who is now a free man, is willingly serving Paul and the gospel because he now has Jesus. He has moved from being useless to useful. That is what the gospel does. It takes a man like Onesimus, a runaway fugitive in a far country, seeing the gospel, and all of a sudden, he goes from being a useless man to being a useful man.

- **Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon**

At some point, Onesimus tells Paul about his sin against his former master, Philemon, because Paul understood there needed to be reconciliation between him and his brother in Christ. I could just imagine when he started having the conversation with Onesimus telling him he needed to go back to Philemon. I imagine Onesimus probably said, Are you sure? I don't think that is such a good idea, let us just forget the past and not deal with all of that stuff, let's just move on to what I am doing now... He doesn't want to go back to Philemon; Philemon had rights over him! If it was a severe enough thing, he could actually give him the death penalty. It was a big deal to have sinned against Philemon. In Paul making Onesimus go back, I think we see that when we become a believer, we don't have to continually runaway from our past. Instead, we actually have the ability, because of the gospel, to go and make our wrongs right. We have the ability to face and overcome our past in some situations. And this is one of those situations where Onesimus was in a place where he could actually go back and make things right.

The next thing we see is that Philemon must forgive Onesimus. Paul says in verse 15, *"For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever...as a beloved brother."* Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, and he is appealing to Philemon to forgive him. He says I could command you to do it because the gospel commands us to, but instead, for love's sake, I just want to appeal to you. Paul says the reason he left your house was so that he could become something more to you, not just a bondservant, but a brother in Christ. God orchestrated him running away so that he could meet me and I could share in the gospel, and then he could come back and you can receive him as a brother in Christ.

So Paul is assuming that when he sends Onesimus back to Philemon, Philemon's response is going to be forgiveness. He says it all in the letter: I know you are going to do it...I am confident you are going to do it...I think you are going to do more than even I would expect. In a real way, I think Paul wants him to send Onesimus back to him so he can continue to labor in the gospel for Paul's sake, because Onesimus is very useful to Paul. But he says he has to send him back because reconciliation has to happen first. He has to deal with the wrongs he has done before he can keep moving forward. He has confidence that Philemon, because he knows the gospel, because he has been forgiven, will be a forgiver. That is what believers do, really. We are forgiven forgivers. That is who we are, what we do. We have been forgiven; therefore, we forgive.

- **Paul invests in the reconciliation**

The next thing that happens in this letter is that Paul invests himself in their reconciliation. Paul is not just a bystander; he invests himself in their reconciliation together. He says in verses 17-19, *"So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self."* Paul invests himself in the reconciliation that is taking place

with Onesimus and Philemon. He is investing so much that even if it is going to cost, he is willing to pay so that these two brothers will be reconciled to each other. You see, Paul knew there might be a stumbling block for Philemon. Let's just say Onesimus stole money from him, and Philemon might be willing to forgive him as long as he paid him back. Paul doesn't want a stumbling block to be between Philemon and Onesimus. So he says if he owes you anything, stole anything, damage to your property, loss of time, loss of labor, whatever it is, just charge the bill to me and I will pay it in full so there will be no stumbling block to your forgiveness of Onesimus. He invested himself for the sake of these two brothers being reconciled together.

## **A Picture of the Gospel Story**

As we recap the story, we have seen Onesimus sins against Philemon, Onesimus finds Paul, he gets saved, and Paul sends him back to Philemon so that he can be forgiven and there can be reconciliation. But if we back up for just a moment, we first notice that it really does mirror the gospel story. It is a perfect picture of the gospel story; this really does picture your own salvation in Christ. We were Onesimus. Think about the story. Onesimus has a master he is rebelling against, running from, and squandering it all in a far country. That is our story! We had a master in Heaven, God who created us, and we rebelled against Him, ran away from Him, and we squandered it all away in a far country. We were fugitives just like Onesimus was a fugitive against Philemon. We have been a fugitive against our Father in Heaven.

Secondly, we see that like Paul, Jesus Christ sought our reconciliation. Paul went between Onesimus and Philemon and tried to work out reconciliation. He says even if I have to pay for the reconciliation, I will do that. But notice that Paul offered to pay while Jesus Christ actually did pay for your reconciliation in full. All of the wrongs that you have done, all of the errors that you have committed, everything you have incurred against God, Jesus



has paid in full on your behalf! You have been reconciled back to God because of Jesus Christ. Jesus has been your reconciliation.

Then thirdly, we see that like Onesimus returned to Philemon, we can return to God our Father because reconciliation has been paid for through Christ. We can now go home to our Father, and we expect to hear said over us, I forgive you. The reason is because Jesus paid it all.

## **In the Shoes of Philemon, Onesimus, or Paul**

So this story of Onesimus running away, getting to come back, and then getting forgiveness is really your story of how you got to go back to God because Jesus Christ paid for your reconciliation and He paid it in full. That is the gospel story. So I want to zero back down into your story right now. I am talking about your story today, maybe tomorrow. You are going to find yourself in the shoes of one of these three men either today, and if not today, then it maybe tomorrow. You are going to find yourself in the shoes of Onesimus, Philemon, or Paul. So when sin happens and you find yourself in the shoes of one of these three men, what should you do?

- **Philemon**

What if you are like Philemon. If you are Philemon, your story is that someone has sinned against you. I don't know what it was, maybe it was big, maybe it was small, maybe it has been yesterday, and maybe it was ten years ago. A brother or a sister has wronged you, sinned against you. So what should you do as a person who has been sinned against? I am going to give you three steps:

### **1. Remember your rebellion**

If you are going to forgive them, the first thing you should do is to remember your own rebellion. Yes, they sinned against you, but you also sinned against God. You have been in rebellion just like they are in rebellion against you, so you can relate very well. See the weight of your sin against God as you think about dealing with the weight of your brother

or sister sinned against you. It is that parable that Jesus talks of the servant who has forgiven all this debt. Then he walks out and a brother comes up to him who owes him a pittance, and he doesn't forgive him and sends him to jail. What? If you had been forgiven by your master, then you should go and forgive those who have little debts against you, because their rebelling against you doesn't even compare to your rebellion against your Heavenly Father. So the first thing you do when it comes to forgiveness is to remember your own rebellion.

## **2. Remember your forgiveness**

When you confess before God and you truly repented, God forgave you. I rebelled and God forgave me. If you remember those two things, then you will be able to do step 3.

## **3. Forgive as you have been forgiven**

As a forgiver, what do you do? You forgive. How can you forgive? You remember your own rebellion and your own forgiveness. It is a gospel thing when it comes to forgiveness, and you are able to forgive people who have sinned against you.

I just want to take a moment to give you a tip when it comes to forgiveness. I think it is really important when someone has wronged you and they come back and try to be reconciled to you and say, "I am sorry, will you forgive me?"; I think it is really important for you to actually say, "I forgive you." Often, we say things like, "Don't worry about it, yeah, that's fine." It's fine, really? So what you are saying is the way I sinned against you is cool and I can just do it again. When you say things like that, when you just shrug it off when they ask for forgiveness, you are saying sin is kind of trivial and it doesn't really matter. That is not true! Sin is a big deal; it is a huge deal! When you say the words, "I forgive you," what you are saying is "yes, what you did was sinful and completely wrong and it deserves hell, but Jesus Christ has paid for it; therefore, I give you forgiveness because he gave it to me." It actually brings the gospel into

your reconciliation with someone else. So when someone asks for forgiveness, don't just shrug it off, say you forgive them because that does gospel work between you and your brother or sister.

- **Onesimus**

What if you are like Onesimus. You sinned against somebody and you are running away. You have sinned and you are on the run. You are the one who has caused injury to someone else, you are now in the place of Onesimus. You have sinned and are running away, what do you do now? Step one is simple.

### **1. Confess your sin**

That is what you have to do. There is no quick fix, you can't just ignore it and look away the rest of your life. You can't avoid them every time you see them. You need to go and confess your sin to them. I want to give you a few tips about confession. The first thing is when you confess to somebody admit your sin, specifically. Say, "I am sorry for sinning against you in, (name your specific sin) will you forgive me?" " Admit your specific sin, and don't bring them into your confession. A lot of times husbands are bad about this, we will say, "Honey, I am sorry I hurt your feelings." You did nothing there in your confession. You didn't say anything about your sin. You basically just said *I am really sorry you got your feelings hurt, but the problem is your feelings, not my sin. If your feelings were a little tougher, we wouldn't be having this conversation. You wouldn't be crying; we would be happy together. If you would just grow a little tougher feelings, everything would be good.* Don't say honey I am sorry I made you cry, say, "Honey, I am sorry I am a jerk and I yelled at you, I sinned." That is different; it calls your sin to light. It is you who are confessing. Also, avoid these two little words, if and but, "You know, I am really sorry for doing this, but if you would have..." What did you just do? You just threw them under the bus in your confession! You are saying that it is really their mistake that brought on your sin. That is not what you do in confession. You confess your sins that you committed. You leave them out of it. And

you leave the excuses out of it, "I am sorry, but you just know I have a temper." No, that is an excuse. That is not a confession of the sin of anger that you just let out.

## **2. Ask for forgiveness**

I think this is very important. If we are going to get forgiveness we need to ask for it. Don't just say you are sorry. Instead, say, "I am sorry I sinned against you in this way, will you forgive me?" You are asking for the gospel to take place. You are putting the ball their court for them to now work out the gospel and to forgive you. At that point, you wait. Sometimes you have to give them time. Some of the things you have done require a lot of time for them to work through forgiveness because you really blew it and it is going to take a while. So be patient and wait for their forgiveness to be given to you.

## **3. You change**

This is very important. You can't just ask for forgiveness and then go do the same thing over and over again. What you are saying is just lip service. You say you're sorry, you ask for forgiveness, you say you will move on, and then you don't. What you are saying is *I'm really not sorry, and it really doesn't break my heart because I continue to do it*. You have to change! You have to alter your behavior to show them that like Onesimus, you went from useless to useful, and you are now a person who is going to walk the confession you have just given. You are going to change because you are going to put that sin to death and you want to grow in holiness.

I want to note that forgiveness from somebody doesn't always restore things back to normal. Sometimes you sin and it is so grievous that there is confession and there is forgiveness, but it means there is a new normal now. Things can't go back to just the way they were. Understand that, sometimes you can really blow it, but it doesn't mean we can't have confession and forgiveness and move on as brothers and sisters in Christ.

- **Paul**

The third pair of shoes you might wear is Paul's. What if you are like Paul. In this situation, you see brothers and sisters at odds with one another. You see that they have sinned against each other, wronged each other. They are not reconciled to one another; they are enemies of one another. What do you do?

### **1. Compel them to be reconciled**

Compel them to do that the gospel commands, and that is to go and be reconciled back to one another. When you find brothers and sisters at odds with one another, you try like Paul did, to come between them and bridge the gap, and bring about reconciliation for the sake of the gospel, for the unity of the body, and the collective sanctification of us all. We try to go and compel them to be reconciled with one another.

### **2. Invest yourself**

Paul became invested in their relationship, so much so that he took time to write a letter, he sent people, and he invested his own name in the sake of their reconciliation. There was an investment of time, commitment, and resources. He thought through how to get them to see their problem, going to one side and then going to the other. There is an investment that comes if you want two people to be reconciled. The question is will you be like Paul, and be willing to invest in others who are at odds with one another so reconciliation can truly happen?

### **3. Willing to suffer loss**

You are willing to suffer loss for the sake of the reconciliation. Paul was willing to say that if it actually costs him even money or whatever, he was willing to pay so that Philemon and Onesimus could forgive, confess, and could be brothers in Christ. He was willing to suffer loss so that they might gain one another. If you find yourself in Paul's shoes, you compel people,

you invest in their lives, and you're willing to even suffer for the sake of their reconciliation.

## **Dealing with Sin in Our Lives**

We have seen in this lesson that Onesimus sinned against Philemon, Paul went in between the two, and then, Philemon is to forgive Onesimus. We saw that it is actually a picture of your story with God. You were Onesimus, you were running in rebellion, but Jesus Christ came and bridged the gap. He paid for your reconciliation so that He could send you back home to your heavenly Father with the forgiveness that He offers you. You, the rebel, got to go home because of Christ and forgiveness. And that touches our everyday life because the truth is that because of the gospel, we are forgivers who forgive. We have been forgiven, so we are commanded to forgive. The bad news is that you are part of an imperfect family, but we are all pursuing perfection. We are imperfect, we are messy, you are going to sin, I am going to sin; we are going to sin against each other. So the expectation is that we are not perfect; we still sin. Therefore, when sin happens, it doesn't lead to shock, you don't move to the next church, you don't say, "Those people still sin!" You say, "This is part of the gospel, they sin and I sin." But in the midst of our sin, we don't fight against each other. We fight for one another so that we can all put sin to death and grow in holiness as we pursue Christ. As we pursue holiness and grow in sanctification, we will be a family that experiences joy and happiness because we are dealing with sin that is definitely going to happen. As forgiven people, we forgive.

What step do you need to take in reconciliation? Maybe you are Onesimus and you have sinned. Your step is to go confess. Work out confession with that person. Maybe you are Philemon and someone sinned against you. You need to work forgiveness towards that person. Or maybe you are Paul and you see people who are estranged from one another. You need to go and invest in their life for the sake of their reconciliation. What step do you need to take? Do you need to confess, do you need to forgive, or do you

need to invest? Sin is going to happen. The question is how are we going to deal with sin? Let us not fight against one another. Let us fight for one another for the sake of each other and for the glory of Christ.

