

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Orange – Sermon Notes

An Imprisoned Appeal

- Today we're returning to our Philemon series.
 - It's more of a mini-series really.
 - But just like any other series it's easy to get lost - to forget major plot points.
- Katherine and I recently went to see a MOVIE that was part of a series.
 - It had been a couple years and we have had at least 2 children since we saw the most recent installment in that series
 - So we needed a quick refresher on what was going on in the plot.
 - We weren't really interested in watching the several movies that had come before it.
- So we sought the help of a recap video.
 - A recap video is exactly what it sounds like.
 - It covers the main plot points of a movie or series so that you don't have to rewatch everything up to that point.
- There are two types of recap videos.
 - Ones without spoilers.
 - And ones with spoilers.
- For the uninitiated - a spoiler is when a major plot point that would have otherwise been a surprise is revealed unceremoniously.
 - It's like someone telling you who won the game you had yet to watch.
- When you watch a recap video that contains spoilers, you will see all the twists;
 - You will know whodunit,
 - The surprise will be spoiled.
- Last week we began a series through the book of Philemon.
 - And we ended with a bit of a cliffhanger.
- We saw how Paul, from the very beginning was attempting to persuade Philemon to do something.
 - It was something that was going to affect his family.
 - Something that would be costly to him.
 - Something that would have been difficult for him to do.
- Because of the difficulty of Paul's request - the apostle is going to great lengths in this letter to be persuasive.
 - But we didn't learn what it was that Paul was going to ask Philemon.
- This week we'll see Paul actually make his appeal.
- But I don't want to spoil it for anyone who wasn't here last week.
 - So here's a quick recap.
- Paul who is imprisoned in Rome is writing this letter to his friend Philemon in Colossae.
 - But he's not just writing to Philemon.
 - He's also writing some people who were potentially part of Philemon's household.
 - And interestingly Paul, also addressed the letter to the church who met in Philemon's home as one of the recipients of this letter.
 - That indicates that this letter was meant to be read aloud in front of the whole church.
 - Which puts pressure on Philemon to grant Paul's request due to the public nature of it.
- Paul begins his letter by being prayerfully thankful Philemon's faith and love toward the Lord Jesus Christ and the saints.

- We considered how the reports which came to Paul about Philemon indicated that he must have been consistently serving the church in exemplary ways.
- We also saw Paul praying that Philemon's service would result in greater knowledge of Christ.
 - This came from verse six where Paul also dropped the hint that Philemon still lacked one thing in his sacrificial service to the saints.
 - We're going to see what that one thing is in our text today.
- We finished up with verse seven and considered how we, like Philemon, could refresh the hearts of the saints with our own service in the church.
- Now you're caught up with no spoilers and we can jump into verses eight through sixteen together.
- Let's start by reading verses eight and nine.

Philemon 8–9 (ESV)

⁸Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,
⁹yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner
 also for Christ Jesus—

- Paul is building off of what he's has just said in verses one through seven.
 - The ESV translation makes this relationship between the first seven verses and those that follow a little tighter by rendering would what would normally be "therefore" as "accordingly".
 - But others like the NASB render that as "therefore".
- If you remember last week we saw how Paul is tracing the trajectory of Christlikeness in Philemon's life.
 - He established a Philemon's precedent of righteousness which he could now stand on when making his ask.
- That's what that "accordingly" is doing there.
 - Paul is referencing Philemon's pattern of sacrifice for the church as a spring board for the appeal that he's going to make.
- We also see Paul doing something else interesting here in these two verses.
 - Just like in verse one Paul humbles himself.
 - He establishes that he has the apostolic authority to issue a command to Philemon.
 - He *could* issue a command.
 - But he chooses not to play that card.
 - This is interesting because in other epistles Paul does issue commands.
 - In other epistles, he delivers instructions to the churches.
 - Like in 1 Corinthians 5:5 he's dealing with a church who is tolerating and even celebrating sexual immorality.
 - He says this to them

1 Corinthians 5:5 (ESV)

⁵you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

- That's an order.
 - Straight from the apostle's desk.
- But here in Philemon Paul exercises restraint.

- He tells Philemon that he would be justified in issuing this command.
- Because what he's asking for is required.
 - Look at the end of verse 8.
 - Paul regards his ask not optional, but what does he call it?
 - Required.
 - A literal translation of what Paul writes here is "what is fitting".¹
 - Paul is calling Philemon to do what's right.
- But rather than order him to do what is fitting, look at what he says he's doing in verse 9
- He's making an appeal.
 - It's a request.
 - But again - it's more than a request.
 - It carries a tone of humility.
 - An appeal is humble.
 - A demand comes down from on high.
 - An appeal comes up from below.
 - Paul is again showing us something about persuasion here.
- The apostle who could command Philemon is making a humble request.
 - Makes me think about the times that I have commanded, when I should have appealed.
- Paul's appeal is couched in the confidence that he has in Christ, but it's not from this boldness that he makes his request.
- His appeal comes out of his love for Philemon.
 - It's on the basis of the apostle's affection for his beloved fellow worker.
- He prefers to make a humble appeal to Philemon because he loves him.
 - The relationship that these two have isn't one of a general shouting orders at his subordinates.
 - It's a friend speaking truth in love to another friend.
 - Paul's tone here reminds me of how he instructs Timothy to correct other men in the church.
 - Look at what he says in 1 Timothy 5:1

1 Timothy 5:1 (ESV)

¹Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers,

- That lack of rebuke and the corresponding presence of encouragement is laced all throughout this letter.
- Paul really wants Philemon to do what is fitting, so he is gentle rather than harsh.
- And again remember that Philemon is hearing this letter read aloud along with the rest of the church.
- That turns up the pressure a bit on Philemon.
 - Just because of the public nature of things.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 402. : "But it does make clear that there is some action that is the "proper" or "fitting" thing for Philemon to do in this situation. Philemon's status as a Christian and "brother" of Paul means that he has an obligation to act in a certain way."

- But Paul is wisely making his request on the basis of love.
- It would be one thing if Paul flexed his authority to get something done.²
 - It might have been embarrassing for Philemon to get ordered around publicly.
 - Philemon could have obeyed grudgingly.³
 - He could have carried out the letter of the law with an embittered heart.
- But Paul wisely makes an appeal for the sake of love,
 - Imagine if Philemon refused.
 - He would be spurning his friend who loves him like a brother.
 - His friend who is imprisoned.
 - How could Philemon - a true believer who loves Paul, the old imprisoned apostle -
 - How could he refuse Paul's appeal?
- So far we've seen a lot of ways that Paul has been persuasive.
 - But we still don't know what he wants from Philemon!
 - What is this costly, sacrificial ask that Paul is going to ask of Philemon?
- Let's keep reading to see if Paul tells us.

Philemon 10–11 (ESV)

¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

¹¹(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)

- Now we finally meet the person at the center of this drama.
 - Onesimus.
- You've heard his name before – Pastor Tony mentioned Onesimus a few times in the Colossians series.
 - Onesimus was a slave who belonged to Philemon.
 - So how does he know Paul?
 - They met in Rome while Paul was imprisoned.
 - Paul tells Philemon in verse 10 that he became the father of Onesimus in prison.
 - That's a phrase that Paul uses in other places to communicate that he led someone to Christ.⁴
 - So Paul led Onesimus to Christ while he was imprisoned in Rome.
 - Which is interesting in itself because as we covered last week, Rome is almost 1500 miles away from Colossae.
 - What was Onesimus doing almost 1500 miles away from his master in Rome?
 - Paul doesn't actually say.
 - But he offers some clues.
 - Onesimus is *returning* to his master.
 - Paul is highlighting his *conversion*.
 - He's pointing out Onesimus's newfound *usefulness*.

² Peter Gorday, ed., *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 313.: “Paul shows here what power his name alone has.” I think Paul is actually doing the opposite here. He's downplaying his authority and personally appealing to a friend.

³ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 186.: “living Christianly makes people more human, not less.”

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 188. : “The Rabbis used the metaphor of sonship to describe the teacher-pupil relationship: Paul was fond of using it for that between himself and his converts (1 Cor. 4:14–15; 2 Cor. 6:13; Gal. 4:19; Phil. 2:22; cf. 1 Tim. 1:2, etc.).”

- And we'll see in just a few moments that Philemon didn't know where Onesimus was.
- Next week we'll read that Paul even brings up the possibility that he may have *wronged his master*.
- What does all this tell us?
 - Onesimus ran away.
 - He fled from Philemon.
 - He likely stole money from Philemon in order to fund his journey.
 - And then he went far far away.
 - But as we read in Colossians — he's returned to Colossae with Tychichus.
- That must have been a tense reunion.
- Imagine the church excitedly gathering in Philemon's home after hearing that the apostle Paul has sent them not one but TWO letters.
 - And then Onesimus walks in after Tychichus.
 - I imagine the room fell silent.
 - That's the slave who stole away from Philemon.
 - Onesimus's desertion was a big deal.
 - His desertion cost Philemon a great deal.
- One scholar suggests that a slave in NT times was worth north of one hundred thousand dollars.⁵
 - So the church probably knew about Onesimus's desertion.⁶
- And now he's back.
 - In the flesh.
 - Why did he return?
 - If you've read ahead, you'll know that Paul doesn't actually mention why Onesimus has returned.
 - In fact look at the appeal that Paul is making here.
 - What is he asking Philemon for?
 - Paul doesn't say!
 - But it's clear that Paul knows Philemon to be someone who shows love and hospitality to the saints.
 - And at the end of Colossians, Paul notes that Onesimus is one of those saints.
 - So if you connect the dots, Paul is asking Philemon to show his characteristic love and hospitality to Onesimus.
 - In short — Paul is asking Philemon to forgive his runaway slave.
 - That's what Paul is asking for on his behalf.
 - Paul is appealing to Philemon to forgive his new brother in Christ for a sin from before he knew Christ.
 - Paul is humbly asking Philemon to do what is fitting.
 - **Forgiveness is fitting.**
 - **That's our first point this morning – forgiveness is fitting.**
 - Now Philemon is faced with a choice.

⁵ David S. Dockery, ed., *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992), 745. : “In NT times the price of a slave was about nine times the wages paid a laborer for a year.” To come up with a figure meaningful for today's audience I took minimum wage and multiplied it by the number of hours that would be worked in a year and then multiplied that number by nine. (\$7.65 x 2080hrs) x 9 (years) = \$143,208.

⁶ Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 343. : “Further, in Onesimus's case the matter was public, perhaps even common knowledge in the church.”

- He could choose to *not* forgive Onesimus.
 - He would be within his rights to do that.
- The Roman justice system gave slave owners a lot of latitude to decide what should happen to slaves like Onesimus.⁷
 - If he wanted to, Philemon could have had Onesimus's face branded with an F for fugitive.
 - So that everyone could see that he was a runaway.
- He could have sold Onesimus to a gladiator trainer who would use him as the practice squad for a warrior prepping for his next fight.
- He could have had Onesimus whipped, mutilated, tortured, and even crucified.
- Think of how ugly it would be if Philemon refused!
 - Think of the witness that would give to the world.
 - As the community of Colossae learns that Philemon, the wealthy host of the Christian church, is punishing his runaway slave — what would they conclude about Christians?
 - That Christians are moral - but when they're wronged, they're just like everyone else.
 - Think of how demoralizing that would be to the church.
 - Their host, someone who they look up to, is publicly taking vengeance on one of their brothers.
 - **Have you watched in discouragement as a brother or sister in Christ totally misrepresents your faith?**
 - It's so discouraging.
 - You just want to scream "that's not who we are!"
 - And think of the witness that would be towards Onesimus.
 - This new believer – freshly acquainted with the mercy of God.
 - Seeking forgiveness from a brother in Christ and instead being met with judgment.
- Philemon is the party who is wronged and must now make up his mind about how he will react.
- And Paul inserts himself into the middle of this situation and appeals to his brother.
- Awhile ago one of my seminary professors said something that describes what Paul is doing here.
 - He said something like this:
 - "Sometimes a believer can find themselves in a tough situation where obedience might be hard or very costly."
 - "In those situations, it's an example of God's grace when a fellow believer comes alongside them and encourages them to obey the Lord."
 - That's what Paul is doing with this letter.
 - He knows that forgiving Onesimus would be hard.

⁷ W. Hultitt Gloer and Perry L. Stepp, Reading Paul's Letters to Individuals: A Literary and Theological Commentary on Paul's Letters to Philemon, Titus, and Timothy, ed. Charles H. Talbert, Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Incorporated, 2008), 6. : "Upon capture, these slaves might be resold to harsher masters. They could also be punished by brutal flogging, branding, mutilation, being made to wear an iron collar engraved with the name and address of the owner and the command "Catch me, for I have fled my master," being sold to work on farms or galleys or in the mines, being thrown to the wild beasts in the arena to satisfy the bloodlust of the populace, or even crucifixion or other means of torment and execution (Garland 1998, 327; Bellen 1971, 17–31; POxy 14.164)."

- There's the risk that Philemon's other slaves might "convert" in order to receive preferential treatment.
- Onesimus has done something that brought great shame to Philemon.
 - His desertion may have had a financial impact on Philemon.
- But for a believer – forgiveness is fitting.
- I want you to see something here.
- This situation with Philemon and Onesimus, it's a reenactment of the gospel.
 - It's like they're rehearsing the gospel and Paul is helping Philemon understand his role.
 - Onesimus plays the part of all humanity.
 - He has his own good in mind.
 - He's looking out for number one.
 - Nobody else is going to take care of me, so I've got to.
 - He spurns his authority; he seeks to make himself the authority.
 - He steals and cheats leaving Philemon bearing the cost of his wrongdoing.
 - Just like all of us, Onesimus racked up a debt of unrighteousness that he can't pay off.
 - He has no resources to make Philemon whole.
 - And now he's come face to face with the one that he hurt.
 - Onesimus can't undo his wrong.
 - Philemon has no reason to forgive him.
 - No reason to trust him again.
 - Philemon would have been justified in punishing Onesimus.
 - Philemon now plays the part of Jesus.
 - Looking upon a wretched sinner.
 - One who has nothing to offer as repayment.
 - He now has the opportunity to accurately portray the gospel in forgiving Onesimus.
 - Forgiveness is at the core of the gospel.
 - And when a Christian withholds forgiveness — they obscure the gospel.
- Withholding forgiveness is a misrepresentation of the God that saved you!
 - If you're a believer you have been forgiven much.
 - More than you know.
- And God would have been totally justified in laying his wrath upon us.
- Our vile hatred toward God demanded justice.
 - And God exacted that justice.
 - But not upon us.
 - Upon his son - Jesus.
 - The exact imprint of his nature took on flesh so he could bear the punishment that we deserved.
 - Jesus bore the cost of our rebellion.
 - Not because we were special - or we were worth it.
 - The Bible says that we were enemies of God.
 - Dead in our sin.
 - But in his great love for us, He sent his son to be our substitution.
 - Such a magnificent display of his glory.
- And it's by believing this and trusting in Jesus's death that we can be forgiven.

- That's the gospel.
- And it's this same gospel that allows us to forgive.
- Every time we find ourselves wronged we are in the place of Philemon.
 - We are getting to act out a miniature version of the gospel.
 - Getting to imitate our savior, Jesus.
- If Philemon had chosen not to forgive Onesimus, he would have testified to a perverted gospel.
 - In fact it wouldn't have been the gospel at all.
- What will you do when you are wronged?
 - Will you imitate Christ?
 - Or will you demand retribution despite your own indebtedness?
- Again - knowing that this might be a challenging situation for Philemon Paul is attempting to diffuse the tension.
 - Looking back at the text we see a not so subtle attempt to ingratiate Onesimus to Philemon.
- In verse eleven Paul says that Onesimus was at one time useless.
 - But now he's different.
 - Now he's useful.
- Paul is doing a couple things here.
 - First if you're reading an ESV Bible you'll notice that there's a footnote in verse 10 here.
 - Onesimus's name means useful.⁸
 - So Paul is likely making a little play on words here with Onesimus's name.⁹
 - It's as if he's saying Onesimus is finally living up to that name you gave him!
 - That name - Onesimus - was likely given to him by Philemon.
 - Renaming slaves was a common practice.
 - Masters would often give them names that they hoped the slaves would live up to.
 - Like if you named your child Obedient.
 - So Onesimus was actually a common name for slaves at the time.¹⁰
 - But apparently he didn't live up to his name.
 - He was useless.
 - I'm not actually sure if Paul means that Onesimus was a poor worker.
 - It could be that Onesimus confessed to Paul that he was lax in his service.
 - Or that he didn't work hard.
 - Or maybe because Onesimus wasn't a believer he couldn't take part in the gospel work that was so important to Philemon.
 - But now according to verse 11, things will be different.

⁸ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 189. : "And if he is *euchrēstos*, Christian and 'useful', that means that his relationship with Philemon, and not just with Paul, will be seen in quite a new light He will be 'Onesimus', 'useful', *both to you and to me*."

⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 408. : "Onesimus's new birth has transformed his character. Paul indicates this transformation with a wordplay that was rather common in the ancient world: Onesimus is no longer *achrēstos* but is now *euchrēstos*."

¹⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 407. : "The name Onesimus, which means 'useful' (see v. 11), was a common one, especially often given to slaves in the hope that they would live up to their name."

- If you remember back to Colossians, Paul instructs bondservants or slaves to serve — to be useful — in light of their salvation.
- Colossians 3:22–24 says:

Colossians 3:22–24 (ESV)

²²Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

²³Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,

²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

- I wonder if Onesimus was part of the reason that Paul wrote this to the Colossian church.
- It's possible that after the conversion of Onesimus, Paul felt it necessary to send him home with some instructions.
- Paul isn't just talking up Onesimus;
- We also see that Paul tells Philemon that he himself considers Onesimus to be useful.
- Paul is vouching for Onesimus now that he has shown a redeemed work ethic.
- Onesimus's usefulness to Paul must have brought an occasion for them to get to know one another too.
- Paul, being imprisoned, may have relied on Onesimus to perform errands for him
- And he would have likely been encouraged by Onesimus's friendship.
- In verse 12 Paul tells of his affection for Onesimus.
- Verse 12 says:

Philemon 12 (ESV)

¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.

- Of course it's obvious to Philemon that Onesimus has returned.
- He's among those hearing this letter.
- But Paul gives a little color to the difficulty of sending Onesimus back.
- Paul really cares about Onesimus.
- But he cares about reconciliation that models the gospel more.
- Look at verses 13 and 14

Philemon 13–14 (ESV)

¹³I 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,

¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

- He says that he would have liked to have retained the services of Onesimus.
- Paul even attributes the service of Onesimus to Philemon.

- Paul is shrewdly and righteously honoring the earthly relationship between Philemon and Onesimus here.¹¹
- He's not doing an apostolic end-run around the earthly reality of Onesimus's enslavement.
- Instead he's portraying Onesimus's service to him as being done in the name of Philemon,
 - This is another tactic of persuasion.
 - He's recasting Onesimus's service to himself not as rebellion, but faithful service in the name of his master.¹²
 - Which is something that I'm sure Philemon is happy to hear about.
 - It would be a really bad look if Philemon protested his converted slave's service to the beloved apostle.
- But then rather than keeping Onesimus as a helper in the name of Philemon, Paul sends him back.
 - So as not to compel Philemon's goodness.
 - The truth is that Philemon had no idea where Onesimus was.
 - There was no Find Friends app back then.
 - And if Paul had kept Onesimus without Philemon's knowledge he would have been toeing the line of deception and compulsion.
 - So he sends him back.
 - Not just for his own conscience though.
 - Paul cares about the reconciliation of these two brothers in Christ.
 - If Paul had kept Onesimus he would have prevented that.
 - He could have just assumed that Onesimus's crime against Philemon was water under the bridge.
 - Just something that happened in the past.
 - If he had just papered over the offense he would in effect be robbing Philemon of the opportunity to forgive Onesimus.
 - But Paul knows that **forgiveness is greater than forbearance.**
 - That is our second point this morning, **forgiveness is greater than forbearance.**
 - That's why Paul sends Onesimus back.
 - They have to make things right.
 - Christians shouldn't just move on from an offense without reconciling.
 - Have you ever been in a situation like that?
 - Where you did something that hurt someone else, and then you never talked about it?
 - Or maybe you were the one that was hurt - but you never brought it up?
 - That's such a strange place to be.
 - Especially with another brother or sister in Christ.
 - You're sort of in relational limbo until you deal with the issue.

¹¹ Peter Gorday, ed., *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 314. : "The idea that Paul could have kept Onesimus with him to minister to him in Philemon's place shows the great power of the gospel: that the servant is made equal to the master" I can appreciate the heart behind this comment. But I think Paul is honoring Philemon as Onesimus's master. Not demonstrating the equalizing effect of the gospel.

¹² Peter Gorday, ed., *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 315. : "This is a strategy that is particularly flattering to the person asked. The idea is that since the act proposed is a thing profitable in itself, it is brought forward in such a way as to win Philemon's concurrence. For two good effects are thus produced: the intercessor gains his point, and the other person is rendered more secure."

- And if you never deal with it, then a distance begins to grow in your relationship.
- This can happen between friends, spouses, coworkers, people in the church.
 - One person does something intentionally or not that hurts another one.
 - Then out of pride or shame the offending party doesn't ask for forgiveness.
 - And funny enough sometimes pride or shame can also keep the one who was wronged from talking about the situation.
 - Then they find themselves in a state of continued forbearance.
 - Forbearance is when you are holding back from doing something that you have the right to do.
 - Choosing not to press charges against a thief who stole from you would be an example of forbearance.
 - Forbearance is not wrong.
 - In fact God showed forbearance.
- In Romans 3:25 Paul talks about how God delayed justice in forbearance.
- But he didn't delay it forever.
 - It would have been wrong for God to just never deal with all sin before Christ.
 - So he sends Christ to

Romans 3:25 (ESV)

²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine *forbearance* he had passed over former sins.

- But God's forbearance eventually gave way to forgiveness
 - when Christ came and died wiping away the stain of sin.
 - God showed forbearance SO THAT he could forgive those who lived before Christ.
- **Forgiveness is greater than forbearance.**
- Friends, when we have been wronged - we must forgive.
- Forbearance is okay for awhile if you need to work on your heart to forgive someone.
 - I think sometimes we confuse the two.
 - We think we've forgiven someone, but we're actually just forbearing.
 - And sometimes our forbearance can turn into a grudge.
 - It's dangerous to hold onto forbearance for too long.
 - It's like holding onto a grenade after the pin has been pulled.
 - It's like fish in the refrigerator - it doesn't keep well.
 - There have been times in my life when I have struggled to forgive.
 - I remember a time when I was asking my friend to help me to determine whether I had actually forgiven someone.
 - It can be tricky.
 - Our hearts are deceitful.
 - It may take time to forgive and that's okay.
 - But ensure that your forbearance gives way to forgiveness.
 - Don't settle in with your grudge.

- Unforgiveness should be uncomfortable for a believer.
- Aside from obscuring the gospel, a believer who is living in unforgiveness deprives themselves of joy.
 - You're exchanging bitterness for joy.
 - It's hard to absorb the cost of someone else's sin, but it's so worth it.
- Jesus considered his suffering on the cross worthwhile in order to forgive us.
- So Jesus

Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)

²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

- His sacrifice which purchased our forgiveness yielded joy.
 - When we forgive someone who has wronged us - we are pursuing a similar joy.
 - We are filled with joy because we are doing what we were made for - bringing Christ glory by imitating him.
- This requires us to bear the cost of the sins of others.
- This forgiveness requires sacrifice from Philemon.
 - If you remember Paul prays that Philemon's loving service would become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.
 - I think Paul was dropping a hint that Philemon had yet to grasp the full knowledge.
 - And here's the opportunity to close that knowledge gap.
- But Philemon is going to have to do it
 - Paul isn't going to make this choice for Philemon.
 - That would be like a teacher who passes a failing student so they don't gunk up the educational system.
- In verse 14 he tells Philemon that he's not interested in forcing his hand.
 - Philemon has make this choice himself.
 - Paul doesn't want compel Philemon's righteousness.
 - Again - that would be robbing Philemon of an opportunity to act like Jesus.
- It gives him an opportunity to live out what Paul's description of God in Colossians 2:13–14
- Paul writes:

Colossians 2:13–14 (ESV)

¹³And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,

¹⁴by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

- Paul can't force Philemon to forgive Onesimus.
- But throughout this letter he has done everything he can to persuade Philemon to sacrifice his claim on justice in the name of the gospel.
 - Paul does that again as he offers a potential reason why God might have ordained Onesimus's desertion.

- Lets read verse 15 and 16

Philemon 15–16 (ESV)

¹⁵For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,

¹⁶no 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 now that Onesimus is back Paul is attempting to curb any wrath that Philemon might be feeling towards his runaway slave.
- He reflects on how the short separation of Philemon from Onesimus has allowed for a dramatic change to take place.
- Eternal good has come out of this brief separation.
 - Onesimus is now a citizen of heaven.
 - Whereas he was once a lost sinner destined for hell - he will now dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
- Who could be mad after hearing that?
 - How could Philemon ignore the good that God brought out of this?
 - Paul is supposing that maybe God has used Onesimus's evil deed for his own purposes.
- While it can be hopeless and maybe even a waste of time to try to assign meaning to every move that God has made throughout history, Paul is demonstrating a theological underpinning of our faith.
 - *God is sovereign over all things.*
 - It's a truth that we actually see in the story of Joseph as well.
- In the book of Genesis Joseph knew what it was to be wronged by others.
- If you remember, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers who hated him.
 - He endured years of suffering in prison and by God's providence he ended up second in command in Egypt.
- His brothers, destitute and starving, come to him to beg for food.
 - They don't recognize him but after a time he reveals his identity.
 - They're terrified of him.
 - They become afraid that he's going to exact revenge on them.
 - They beg for mercy and he says to them:

Genesis 50:20 (ESV)

²⁰As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

- God used the evil acts of his brothers to elevate him to a position of power in Egypt.
 - Not so that he could one day exact revenge on his brothers.¹³
 - But so that he could save the people of Israel from whom Christ would eventually come.

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 191.: "Joseph, like Paul, held a steady belief in God's providential overruling of human sin and folly. Patience and forgiveness grow well in soil like that."

- Joseph knew that God can use evil for good.
- Paul is applying that same truth here.
 - He knows that God works all things for the good of those who are called according to his purpose.
- That promise isn't just for Joseph.
 - It's not just for Philemon and Onesimus.
 - It's for you and me.
 - I don't know what kinds of pain or disappointments you've endured in your life at the hands of others.
 - I know that some of you that have gone through absolute tragedies.
 - Other people can be the cause of great loss or pain.
 - And it can be tempting in the aftermath of those moments to believe that God doesn't really care about you.
 - Or maybe he's not even aware.
 - But I want to encourage you to trust him.
 - He doesn't waste pain.
 - Even if you don't understand it now, one day you will.
 - On that day all tears will be wiped away.
 - And you will praise him for his goodness.
- Our lives in eternity will afford us this perspective.
- This eternal perspective helps us to forgive now.
 - One day you will forgive every wrong done to you.
 - The wrongs that have been done to us will all be forgiven.
- Nobody will be holding a grudge in heaven.
- **Forgiveness is our future.**
- That's our last point this morning.
 - **Forgiveness is our future.**
- If you are destined for heaven you will forgive all those who have wronged you.
 - But don't wait until heaven to forgive.
 - Why would you postpone joy?
 - Why would you forgo freedom?
 - If you've been living with unforgiveness you know what I'm talking about.
 - You're not free.
 - Live in the joy and freedom that comes from reflecting the core of the gospel to others.
 - Paul is using this reasoning to further soften any unforgiveness in Philemon.
 - Paul writes that Philemon will receive Onesimus back forever.
 - We know that both Philemon and Onesimus die;
 - So Paul can't be talking about their earthly slave/master relationship.
 - He's talking about the eternity they'll share.
 - It's as if he's asking Philemon — why would you refuse to forgive someone that you're going to share eternity with?
 - One day he will share eternity with Onesimus — but their relationship has already changed.
 - Onesimus is his brother.
 - And not just a brother.

- Look at verse 16.
 - Philemon is to be treating Onesimus as a *beloved brother*.
- It may be that Paul intentionally uses the same phrase here that he used to describe Philemon himself in verse 1.¹⁴
- He calls Philemon beloved in his greeting, and now he's using that same word to refer to Onesimus.
 - This drives home the point that Onesimus is forgiven.
 - And now that Onesimus is a fellow believer — things are different.
- I think Paul might be making a play for something beyond the forgiveness of Onesimus.
 - Like we said earlier, Paul has been vague throughout this whole letter.¹⁵
 - He doesn't actually come right out and say that Philemon needs to forgive Onesimus.
 - He hasn't actually asked for anything explicitly yet.
 - He's been super indirect and now we have this puzzling statement.
- Paul asks Philemon to have him back no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant — a beloved brother.
 - What does that sound like?
 - Kinda sounds like Paul is asking Philemon to upgrade his relationship with Onesimus.
 - Kinda sounds like Paul is asking Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom.
- Especially when we consider that last part of verse 16.
 - Paul calls Philemon to consider Onesimus a brother “both in the flesh and in the Lord”
 - Paul is telling Philemon to let their gospel relationship supersede their natural relationship.¹⁶
 - Philemon is already a “brother” of Onesimus in the Lord.
 - So why should a brother in Lord be a slave in the flesh?
- Paul doesn't come right out and ask Philemon to free Onesimus in this passage.
 - But *we will* see more hints like this from Paul next week.
- We'll also see Paul call Philemon to act out the gospel again.
 - We'll see another call to forgive.
- Paul knows the importance of forgiveness.
 - It's the core of the gospel!
 - And when Christians withhold forgiveness, they distort the gospel.
 - They misrepresent it.
 - It's because we have been forgiven that we must forgive.
 - **Forgiveness is fitting** for those who are in Christ.

¹⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 422. : “Paul tellingly refers to Onesimus here with the same language he has used in addressing Philemon himself: a “brother” (*adelphē*; vv. 7, 20) and “dear friend” (*agapētō*).”

¹⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 419. : “However it took place, the parting between Philemon and Onesimus was hardly cordial; and it would not serve Paul's purposes to remind Philemon of the painful episode.”

¹⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 422. : “While, therefore, the issue is by no means as clear as some interpreters make it, it is likely that this opening phrase means “no longer as primarily a slave in your view of him.” Paul is saying, in effect, “Your relationship with Onesimus will no longer be dictated by your legal relationship (master-slave) but by your spiritual relationship (brothers).”

- We have been shown forgiveness and we have no right to withhold it from others.
- We have no right to only be forbearing.
- **We should Forgiveness is greater than forbearance.**
- And in light the fact that **forgiveness is our future**, we make the most of the breath in our lungs now to forgive those that have wronged us.
- Let us all act out the same forgiveness that we have been show in Christ.
- **Let's pray together.**