

THE GOSPEL ENABLES FORGIVENESS

JESUS MADE ME DO IT

In 2015 Pixar made a movie called Inside Out about a tween girl named Riley who moves from Minnesota to San Francisco with her family and is having a hard time adjusting to her new life. The movie shows the inner workings of her emotions with each emotion portrayed by a character. Joy always wants to be in charge to keep Riley happy and always tries to keep Sadness away from the control panel.

But as Riley encounters the conflicts of this movie, her emotions get the better of her and her relationship with her family starts to break apart. She decides to run away.

Joy finally gives up control and allows Sadness to step in and change some of Riley's happy memories to sad ones and allow Riley to grieve the life she left behind in Minnesota.

VIDEO

Her family didn't want to punish her, they just wanted her back. They wanted to restore the family unit. They had to learn to accept the new emotions that Riley was dealing with. A new and more complicated version of their daughter.

Intro/Review

Which brings us to our runaway slave names Onesimus.

Last week a few people said they were getting confused by the names Philemon and Onesimus and forgot who was who, so we I will try to simplify it this week. Philemon or Phil, as we will call him, is a wealthy Roman believer who likely hosts the church in Collossae in his home. Phil has a slave named Onesimus, or O as we will call him, O has wronged Phil, maybe stole something costing Phil money and has runaway. O visits the Apostle Paul in prison and becomes a Christian.

So Paul writes a letter appealing to Phil on the basis of the brotherhood found in Jesus that he is sending O back to him, but instead of punishing him as a runaway slave, Paul says receive him as a brother in Christ, as an equal.

This is a radical, audacious request and something that likely only happens with the power of Jesus. Forgiveness is not easy, but it is a necessary part of our faith and our identity as Jesus Followers.

Remember forgiveness is not an emotion but an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

Before we look at today's text I would like to double back to a verse from last week that we didn't have time to cover.

Philemon 1:11

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

This verses seem to indicate that O was not a very good slave since Paul described his as useless. But because of his new found identity in Jesus Paul says he his very useful.

Maybe this happened to you as a kid, you know its your job to take out the trash and you are on your way to take it out and your dad says, "Hey, I need you to take out the trash." And now you don't want to because you are being forced to do it.

This is the power of a changed life. As we said last week, the Gospel changes everything. Even something seemingly small like making a useless person a useful one.

Alright lets pick up where we left off...

Philemon 1:17-21

17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. **18** If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. **19** I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. **20** Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. **21** Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

While we get Paul's motivation, isn't it still bad news that Paul sends a slave back to his master at all, regardless of his motives? Doing so is clearly risky for O: Phil may or may not respond well to the letter. And, would Paul expect O simply to slip back into his role as slave? If so, this also seems pretty bad.

But let's give it up for O, His faith in the power of the Gospel to change hearts and lives, status and social standing is put into action. He has seen the change in himself and trusts that the same will be true for Phil. But Phil may not respond the way he and Paul hope, and yet he still goes.

This reminds me of the story of Abraham almost sacrificing his son Isaac, we often hear account or see artists renditions of Isaac being a small child maybe 10 years old. But since he was able to carry the wood for the altar many historians and theologians say he was more likely and older teenager or in his 20's. Jewish historian Josephus says that Isaac was probably 25.

The point being, he was not easily overpowered by his 125 year old father, but had the ability to free himself and run away. But his faith in God was the same as his fathers, and he willingly allowed himself to be laid down on that altar to be sacrificed. Much like Jesus would later do on the cross.

I want us to understand how radical this request from Paul was. This is way beyond kindness—it's unheard of! Freeing an enslaved person and treating them like family would mean upsetting the status quo of Roman social order. Why should Phil do such a thing? At this point, Paul pulls a brilliant move, recalling the key word *koinonia* from his opening prayer. He says that if you are truly a "partner" with me, then "welcome O as if he were me.

This is the radical nature of *koinonia*, of partnership, of brotherhood in Christ, social and class distinctions are overcome. Phil and O are now family.

v. 18-19

18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. **19** I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

The beauty of forgiveness is that it doesn't pretend sin never happened; it simply releases the debt.

Paul says charge it to my account. Then he emphasizes I AM WRITING THIS WITH MY OWN HAND, I will repay it. Paul stands in for Jesus willing to pay the debt.

Paul reminds Philemon, that he owes Paul, his own salvation, suddenly showing that all of our debt pales in comparison to what Christ has paid.

Within this request, we can see the heart of Paul's Gospel message being acted out. For Paul, the Gospel IS about reconciliation as he told the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 5:19

In the Messiah, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting people's sins against them.

In this situation, Paul is playing out the role of Jesus. He will absorb the consequences of O's wrongdoing and pay the cost himself, all so that he can be reconciled to Phil. Jesus says I will will the cost for your sin so that you can be reconciled to God.

Paul's message was about more than a legal transaction—it's all about *koinonia*. O, Phil, and Paul are all equal partners before God, and they all share the same need for forgiveness. The ground is level before the cross. Phil and O can no longer relate merely as "master" and "slave" because they are now family members, brothers in the Messiah, as Paul tells Phil, along with the entire church of Colossae.

Colossians 3:11

In God's new family, people are not Greek or Jewish, circumcised or uncircumcised, foreigners or uncivilized, slave or free. But the Messiah is all, and is in all people.

We addressed O's faith and the risk he was willing to take, it seems that Paul cared for O, why risk his protégé's freedom?

The answer is that the core message of the Gospel is a message of reconciliation. God's vision for humanity is one in which people love God and one another in beautiful harmony. However, the Bible depicts humans as estranged from God and each other due to human sin.

Jesus' work, then, was to make possible the reconciliation of these rifts. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." Forgiveness—both God's forgiveness of people, and people's forgiveness of one another—is the first step toward reconciliation.

Given this central role of forgiveness and reconciliation in the gospel, we shouldn't be surprised that Paul would be willing to take the risk he does in sending O back to Phil. For Paul, it is simply unacceptable that two followers of Jesus would be estranged in the way that O and Phil were at the time the letter was written.

The modern Western mind tends to elevate freedom and security from bodily harm above most other values. I think this is why we worry about what Paul did. I think that Paul also prized these values to some extent—hence his veiled request that Phil free O, and his hope that Phil would treat O gently.

However, there is no getting around the fact that, in Paul's mind, reconciliation between two estranged Christian brothers is *more* important than personal autonomy or security from bodily harm.

In *Back to the Future* Doc Brown is always telling Marty "You're not thinking 4th dimensionally." Marty is driving on the train tracks and even though the train tracks run out when he travels to the future, the train tracks will be there waiting for him.

Jesus constantly has this issue with His disciples where He's teaching them and they can only see how it applies to that moment and can't think with a Heavenly mind.

We cannot be so focused on our temporary problems, setbacks, even pain, suffering and freedom, that we miss the better long term eternal benefits that God is preparing us for.

If God allowed Onesimus to go through the difficulty of slavery, running away, and the stress of not knowing whether he would be received back as a brother or slave...but through that process he received his salvation, it was worth it. Better than remaining a free man in this life and never finding salvation. Salvation is worth whatever temporary suffering we face during our short time on earth.

21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Have you ever known someone who had such great influence over you that they could ask you to do anything and you believe that you could and should do it. Paul had this with Philemon. And Paul is confident the Philemon will not only except Onesimus back, but that he will go over and above in receiving him as a brother in Christ.

To close, I want to revisit this notion that Paul would pay for whatever crime Onesimus was guilty of.

Martin Luther said, "Here we see how Saint Paul lays himself out for poor Onesimus...and so sets himself, as if he were Onesimus, as he had himself done something wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus also Saint Paul does for Onesimus with Philemon... we are all his Onesimi, to my thinking."

We are all Onesimus. Derelict in our obligations to our Master. Useless, running from our responsibilities. Unable to pay our debt. And Jesus, like Paul steps in and says I will pay the debt, so that you and your Master may be reconciled.

SMALL GROUPS

What does Paul offer to do on behalf of Onesimus? What does this show about his attitude toward the situation?

What does Paul mean when he says, "charge it to me" (1:18)? How is this similar to what Jesus has done for believers?

How does Paul use his relationship with Philemon to make his appeal? Is it appropriate for him to bring his personal relationship into this issue? Why or why not?

How does Paul's request for Philemon to welcome Onesimus "as you would welcome me" set a high standard? What does it mean to forgive someone "as you would forgive me"?

What potential barriers are in the way of reconciliation in our own lives?

How can we demonstrate grace and love in our interactions, especially when others have wronged us?

What does it look like to truly "receive" someone back into a relationship, beyond just words?