

PHILEMON'S VIEWPOINT

STUDIES IN PHILEMON #1

Of all of the U.S. Senators who have served our country, James Shields remains unique. He is alone in being the only man to represent 3 separate states as a Senator. Unlike baseball players who are often traded from team to team, Senators are normally very stable - representing the state where they have roots and a favorable reputation among the people. But Shields was different. After returning home from the Mexican War, he was elected by the state of Illinois to serve as their Senator in 1849. But when he lost in his reelection bid, he just moved farther west to Minnesota. Minnesota was just becoming a state at that time, so James Shields had the privilege of becoming its first U.S. Senator. Our country was in the midst of the Civil War when his term expired, so he decided to take a leave from politics to serve as a brigadier general with the Union Army. Then when the war was over, Shields moved south to Missouri where he was appointed to serve the last 2 months of an unexpired term in the Senate in 1879. So James Shields remains the only person to have served in the U.S. Senate representing 3 separate states.

But there was another incident in Shield's life that occurred in his youth that had perhaps a greater impact upon our nation. When he was just a young man living in Illinois, a couple of decades before he was elected to the Senate, he was the Illinois state auditor. A reporter writing for the Springfield Journal was especially critical of his ethics. This reporter didn't just write one editorial criticizing his handling of the state finances, but there were several in a series

trying to expose certain practices which Shields was reportedly involved in. So angry did James Shields become that he decided that he must defend his honor by challenging this reporter to a duel. Because the reporter was a female, the accepted customs of the times dictated Shields to challenge the reporter's fiancé to a duel to defend his honor. The date was set. The weapons were chosen. But, happily for our entire nation, at the last minute this fruitless duel was mediated and cancelled. Cooler heads prevailed. Shields was willing to forgive and release his vengeful anger. And the 2 participants who were scheduled to duel to death actually in time became close friends. We can be thankful for that today. For that outspoken reporter was a young woman named Mary Todd. And her fiancé who got dragged into this duel, who undoubtedly would have lost and been killed, would become the 16th president of the U.S., Abraham Lincoln.

Every person has a natural tendency to become defensive when he or she feels wronged. There is a normal desire to defend our honor when we feel that it has been wrongfully represented. And sometimes, it is necessary to defend ourselves in court or on other occasions when there has been a misunderstanding.

But what a beautiful thing it is when a person who has been wronged is willing to forgive. When relationships are restored. When wrongs are made right.

When hostilities are released. Theologians and physicians and sociologists all agree that this is the healthiest response both spiritually and physically and socially. Theologians agree because we are never more like God than when we release hostilities and choose to forgive. That is what God has done for us. That is the model that Christ portrayed from the cross when he asked for forgiveness for

his enemies. It is spiritually healthy to forgive. But physicians also agree. For the overwhelming evidence points to anger and hostility being a major root of many illnesses which we suffer today. As Dr. John Powell said, *When a person stays angry, his stomach keeps score.* And sociologists also agree that anger is destructive to our society. I heard just this past week of the amazing results of a recent study of fatal car accidents. According to the study, around 20% of those killed in fatal car accidents in our nation had a major conflict or fight with someone close to them within 6 hours of the accident..

This morning, we are beginning a brief 4 part series on one of the shortest books in the Bible. There are 5 one chapter books in the Bible - 1 in the O.T. (Obadiah) and 4 in the N.T. (2nd and 3rd John, Jude and Philemon). The only 1 chapter book that the Apostle Paul wrote, Philemon, is a beautiful picture of forgiveness and reconciliation.

We are going to look at this brief book 4 times from 4 different viewpoints. There are 3 major characters in the book of Philemon. Other names are mentioned in the introduction and conclusion, but there are 3 main participants. Philemon, of course, is the recipient of the letter. Paul is the author of the book. And Onesimus is the subject about whom this letter is written.

*Looking at this book from Philemon's viewpoint lets us look thru the eyes of one who has been wronged. Here was a godly man who had been robbed and cheated. This allows us to see a godly model of responding to injustices suffered.

*Looking at this book from Onesimus' viewpoint lets us look thru the eyes of one who has repented of his sinful ways and experienced a changed life.

Onesimus was the man who had wronged Philemon. But Onesimus had found the Lord and had been moved by the Spirit of God to repent of his sinful ways. His example allows us to look at this matter of repentance and restitution and see what is involved in these from God's viewpoint.

*Looking at this book from Paul's viewpoint lets us look thru the eyes of one who is serving the Lord faithfully in unfavorable circumstances, one who doesn't give up on people, and one who is actively trying to mediate and bring about reconciliation. His example allows us to see a model peacemaker and reminds us of the beatitude which our Savior gave, *Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God.*

*But then there is a 4th viewpoint which we would conclude our study with - and that is Christ's viewpoint. For this story gives to us a beautiful picture of redemption. That is undoubtedly one of the major reasons why God the Holy Spirit chose to include this brief, personal letter among the canonical books of the Bible. For in addition to its personal examples, it also pictures the redemption that God has provided for each of us.

*Now let's begin this morning by looking at this story thru the eyes of Philemon. Philemon was a godly man. His very name means *the loving one*. We know from the book of Colossians that Philemon was one of the leaders of the church at Colossae - one of the most important churches of these N.T. times. Paul addresses Philemon in verses 1 & 2 as *his dear friend and fellow worker*.

PHM 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker,² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home:

Apphia was probably Philemon's wife. Archippus was likely the pastor of the Colossian church - and many feel that Archippus might have been one of Philemon's sons. So we are seeing one of the most visible leaders in this 1st century church when we see this man, Philemon.

*Philemon had been wronged. One of the servants in his household whose name was Onesimus had looted his house and run away to the city of Rome. Rome, the large capital city of the Empire, was a natural place for many fugitives to run - for they could easily become lost amongst the crowds of the populace center. But in the sovereign hand of God, Onesimus had somehow come into touch with the Apostle Paul who was in prison in Rome. Perhaps Onesimus' conscience had bothered him and he had sought out Paul. He had undoubtedly heard of the Apostle many times in his master's house. But whatever the reason, Onesimus had come into contact with Paul and Paul had lead him to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, a new Christian, Onesimus was desirous of returning to Philemon's household to make things right with the man whom he had wronged. That was the reason for this letter. Paul was writing this letter as an introduction that Onesimus could give to Philemon on his return back to Colossae, this leading city of Asia Minor. So as we look at this letter from Philemon's viewpoint, we are looking through the eyes of a mature believer who has been wronged and who is

being challenged to forgive and restore.

PHILEMON IS AN EXAMPLE OF A MATURE BELIEVER'S RESPONSE WHEN HE HAS BEEN WRONGED: Now what lessons can we learn from Philemon's example this morning. I would invite you to note 3 observations from this brief letter of 25 verses with me.

1. PHILEMON WAS LIVING A LIFE WHICH BROUGHT JOY AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE HEARTS OF OTHER BELIEVERS. READ VS. 4-7

PHM 1:4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶ I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

The Apostle Paul speaks here both of Philemon's faith and love. Paul says that Philemon's testimony was the source of great joy and encouragement in his personal life. Imagine that. Having such fine character and integrity that you could bring both joy and encouragement to the Apostle Paul. Especially remembering Paul's uncomfortable and confining conditions being in a Roman jail cell, these words must have brought a sense of satisfaction to Philemon as he read them. And certainly, the character that Philemon had developed in his walk with the Lord provided for him a solid foundation upon which to build in life.

But in some ways, Satan could have used Philemon's outstanding character to

hinder a spirit of forgiveness if Philemon weren't sensitive to the enemy's wily methods. After all, if Philemon would have been a wicked man, cruel and heartless to others, Onesimus' running away would have been more understandable. Philemon could have even understood why the situation happened more easily. Very often, the forgiveness and understanding that people in the world offer to one another is based upon the fact that they are guilty of the offense themselves. The person in the office who cuts corners and manipulates people himself can easily understand why a colleague adopts the same methodology. So he might have a tendency to adopt an attitude of tolerance to all because he really wants tolerance of his own shortcomings.

But Philemon was a model master. He was a loving person. He was a man of great faith. He had a reputation beyond dispute. We can only assume that he would have been one of the best masters in all of the city of Colossae. For Onesimus to take advantage of his graciousness and steal many valuable things from his household could have been a real blow to Philemon, causing him to even question the value of his gracious behavior towards his servant.

Perhaps you heard the story about a scientist who claimed to have discovered a formula to give inanimate objects life. The news paper reporters were impressed with the news of this revolutionary formula, but, of course, demanded proof that it worked. So the scientist arranged a demonstration out in the center of the city park - he was going to turn the statue at the war memorial to life. Crowds gathered out at the statue of the mighty military general sitting upon a great stallion brandishing his sword and pistol. The scientist rubbed the formula all over

the soldier's body and sure enough, the metal statue began to creak and move. In a moment, the general got down off of his horse and faced the astonished crowd. One of the reporters, never at a loss for words, asked the now breathing statue a question, *General, you have now been given life. Tell us, what is the first thing that you are going to do.* Without a moment's hesitation the general replied lifting his pistol into the air, *I'm going to shoot me about 2 million pigeons.*

It's easy for people, especially good people who try to do what is right and try to follow the commandments of God, to feel violated when they are taken advantage of. When they are sincerely trying to obey God, being good citizens and neighbors, and then the pigeons of this world fly over them, it is easy to resent them. *I don't deserve this,* they reason. And they are right. Perhaps there were many other masters who deserved to have their houses looted by their servants, but Philemon didn't. He was a man who tried to treat others with respect and love. But Onesimus have taken advantage of his kindness. It would have been easy for Philemon to feel violated and vengeful towards Onesimus.

But the Apostle Paul had such respect for Philemon and confidence in the character of this man that he could send the wayward servant back to his master with the confidence that Philemon would do what was honoring to God.

One of the quiet, routine duties in each of our lives is building character. This is a daily duty. It is not spectacular or heroic; it is normally just a routine part of our daily living. But building strong character is essential in each of our lives because it gives to us the foundation that we need to perform the heroic duties. Paul was asking Philemon to perform what would have been an heroic duty in his

day. But Paul had the confidence to make such a request because Philemon was a man of integrity and character.

2. But notice a second observation with me. Paul did not beat around the bush here. PHILEMON WAS RESPONSIBLE TO FORGIVE ONESIMUS FOR THE WRONG DONE TO HIM. And Paul let Philemon know that he expected that response out of him. READ VS. 17-18.

PHM 1:17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

Now it is simply impossible for us to understand how revolutionary this request was from the pen of Paul to Philemon in his day. There are many who have been extremely critical of statements which Paul made in the Bible concerning slavery. We all have a tendency to impose our culture and values on those in Biblical times. Today, we are privileged to live in a time when physical slavery is illegal. How thankful we are for that privilege. It is right and proper for all human beings to live in freedom and be respected as being bearers of the image and likeness of God himself.

When the Apostle Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon here, and when he speaks in other passages about servants being subject to their masters, many are critical of these statements. Why didn't Paul openly advocate Christians freeing all slaves? Why didn't Paul encourage Onesimus to just keep running away from Philemon here? Why didn't Paul use his position to lobby against slavery?

There are 2 major considerations which are overlooked when these objections

were raised. The first is the theological foundation that Paul was laying that would bring freedom to all people and the end to slavery in the Roman Empire. Paul spoke about the cross of Calvary breaking down the barrier between the slave and the free. Paul spoke about the value and worth of all people. Paul spoke about the church treating all people equally, not showing respect to social status or wealth. These were the foundations which would eventually lead to the undercutting of slavery in the Roman Empire - and that would be realized in the generations to come. So the Apostle Paul was not advocating slavery, he was not promoting it. Rather he was laying a foundation for its destruction. And that brings us to the second consideration. The abolition of slavery could not have taken place immediately in the Roman Empire without an entire breakdown of the whole society. And Paul would have been intelligent enough to realize that. We have to remember that only 10% of the people who lived in the Roman Empire were actual Roman Citizens. That meant that the vast majority of the others were slaves of one kind or another. It would have been disaster for the society to suddenly change the whole structure in a revolutionary manner. Can you imagine what would happen in the U.S. today if 90% of the people lost their jobs tomorrow and didn't have any place to live or any means of acquiring food to eat for themselves or their families? I mean we have just seen the devastation of this happening in just one of our major cities. What if 90% of the cities in our country were like New Orleans in that everyone lost their homes and jobs. That is what would have happened in the Roman Empire if suddenly the entire structure of their society were changed. It would have been chaos, disaster, anarchy. Millions would have

starved to death. There would have been riots everywhere. Paul knew that. He knew that a change of this magnitude would take time. So he planted the seeds and watered them so that they would grow.

Some of those seeds we find planted right here in this brief letter. In the accepted pagan Roman culture, there was no question what Philemon would do with a servant who had wronged him like Onesimus had. Most masters would punish a servant who ran away severely. But a servant who had not only run away, but had stolen good as well would most likely have been put to death. That servant could never be trusted again.

But Paul said that he expected better out of Philemon. Philemon was to forgive Onesimus and welcome him just as warmly as he would welcome Paul himself. And what Onesimus owed to Philemon because of what he had taken, Philemon was to charge that to Paul's account. The indication was that, like the Prodigal son, Onesimus had squandered all that he had taken in Rome before he came to the Apostle and found faith in Christ. Paul knew that Philemon wasn't going to send him a bill. Paul had lead Philemon to the Lord some years earlier. Paul was asking for complete forgiveness from Philemon. That was Philemon's duty towards Onesimus as a fellow brother now in Christ. And this brings us to our final observation for this morning.

3. PHILEMON WAS ENCOURAGED TO SEE GOD'S PURPOSES IN THIS DIFFICULT SITUATION IN HIS LIFE. READ VS. 15-16

¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave,

as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

What a revolutionary statement Paul was making here in light of the day in which he was living. Philemon, Onesimus used to be your slave. And he severely wronged you. But now he has been born again into the family of God. So now, he is your brother in Christ. Before he was a detriment to you. He was dishonest. He caused you pain. He was useless. But now as a fellow member of God's family, he is useful. That is, by the way, what Onesimus means - *useful*. Now you can have confidence in him. Now he will stand by your side and support you and the church as a brother in Christ. So see the good that God has brought out of this seemingly disastrous situation. Onesimus running away and looting your house certainly appeared to be a disastrous situation. But God has brought good out of it.

Onesimus found Christ in Rome. Now you have more than a new faithful servant; now you have another brother in Christ as well.

Have you ever thought that God allows situations into your life that can produce anger and a tendency towards revenge for your spiritual good? Have you ever thought that God desires to use these situations for spiritual growth and refinement in your life? Doesn't the Bible say, *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* Rom. 8:28. Wouldn't the *all things* include situations that could provoke us to anger?

You see, that was what Paul was trying to get Philemon to see here. He was trying to get him to realize that while Onesimus leaving him was wrong, while it

was a tragedy, and while Philemon's loss of material goods was a violation to him, God in His mighty power had worked this situation out for good.

*Onesimus had gotten saved.

*Philemon now had a new brother in the Lord

*While Onesimus had been a dishonest , reluctant servant before, now Onesimus was going to be faithful, hard-working servant because he was now serving the Lord. So whatever Philemon lost would undoubtedly be made up eventually by the greater productivity in this new, revitalized, useful servant.

As we conclude this morning, let me make some personal applications to each of our lives. And especially to some who might be here this morning who are harboring anger and bitterness in your spirits. Perhaps you have been wronged and violated and there is no question about this. In the eyes of the world, you have every right to harbor anger and resentment in your hearts. And the fact that you have tried to live for the Lord and follow his will just makes it worse, because you didn't deserve the wrong that you suffered. Perhaps this wrong occurred a long time ago - perhaps you were sexually molested as a child, or your father or mother deserted you, or something happened in your life that has caused you resentment and anger all these years. Perhaps this wrong occurred this past week - maybe you didn't get that promotion that you deserved, or maybe your spouse said something to hurt you, or perhaps a friend betrayed you.

Let me encourage you to forgive this morning. Just let it go. There is no question that this is what God wants you to do. It is your duty as a Christian brother or sister to give it up and forgive. It will bless your life if you will let it go

and forgive. It will help you spiritually and physically and emotionally - and it will help all of us socially. And as you release this anger and bitterness in forgiveness, an amazing thing will begin to happen. You might not see it immediately; it might take some time; or maybe you may never see it in this lifetime - but as you respond in the proper and godly manner, God will begin to use this seeming disaster in your life for your good. God will begin to enrich and strengthen your life. Your character will be deepened. Your love will grow. Your faith will be strengthened. For God delights in bringing good out of evil. And God will do that in your life this morning.