



Central Peninsula Church

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Moving Toward Reconciliation

SERIES: *Restoring Relationships God's Way*

Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Miserables*, is a story about Jean Valjean who was sentenced to a 19-year prison term for stealing a loaf of bread. During his imprisonment Valjean hardened into a tough convict. No one could beat him in a fight. No one could break his will. After many years, Valjean earned his release but found he had nowhere to go. So he wandered through the village roads seeking shelter, until a generous bishop had mercy on him. But that night, while the bishop and his sister fell off to sleep, Valjean rose from his bed, rummaged through the house and crept off into the darkness with the family silver. The next morning three policemen knocked on the bishop's door, with Valjean in hand. They had caught him with the stolen silver, and were ready to send him back to prison for life. But the bishop responded in a way no one expected. "So here you are! he said to Valjean. "I'm delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest, and worth a good 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?" Valjean was startled and now staring at the old man with an expression no words could convey. Valjean was no thief, the bishop told them. "This silver was my gift to him." When the policemen left, the bishop gave the candlesticks to his guest, who was now speechless and trembling. "Do not forget, do not ever forget," said the bishop, "you have promised to use the money to make yourself an honest man." The power of this bishop's act, which defied every human instinct for revenge, changed Valjean's life forever. A naked encounter with forgiveness melted the granite defenses of his soul. So he kept the candlesticks as a precious memento of grace and dedicated himself from then on to helping others in need.

As we wrap up our mini-series on Philemon, this story from Victor Hugo's novel illustrates the process Paul believes Philemon will follow in regards to Onesimus. Paul has been mediating a rift between these two believers. And, like his Lord, Paul placed a high premium on face-to-face reconciliation. So he sends Onesimus back to Philemon for resolution. Onesimus had wronged Philemon in his own home. But he is now willing to return and make amends at whatever cost to himself. And Paul is confident that, in the same way the bishop treated Jean Valjean,

Philemon will care for the slave's spiritual needs. Let's pick up the story, starting in verse 17.

A. Accept the Person

Paul writes "**If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.**" This verse is the letter's climax. We can imagine Onesimus arriving at Philemon's door, unexpectedly, with the hope he will be greeted with the same hospitality that Paul himself would expect. But in all fairness to Philemon, even the most forgiving of Christian masters would find it difficult not to be a little angry upon finding a runaway slave at his doorstep. The word that Paul uses for "accept," however, requires that Philemon go beyond a mere welcome. It literally means "to take to one's self." This has a slightly different ring to it. Welcoming someone can often be a matter of duty or protocol. But accepting them is a gift from the heart. If someone gives a painting to a friend, he is asking that friend to give it a place in his own home. Ultimately, a gift only becomes a gift once it's been accepted. And when that happens, it then acquires a place in the life of the other. So Paul is asking that Philemon restore Onesimus to fellowship by giving him access to his very heart. And in this gift of acceptance, there is little room for any prejudice.

How difficult it is for us to accept those who aren't cut from the same cloth as ourselves. How clearly the lines of discrimination are woven into the very fabric of our lives. A certain wife brought a monkey home one day. The husband, who didn't want a monkey littering up their house, objected. "Where is he going to eat?" he asked. "At our table," she replied. "Where is he going to sleep?" he inquired. "In our bed." "What about the odor?" he demanded. She thought about that, wrinkled her nose, and said: "Well, I got used to you; I guess the monkey can too."

Every society is characterized in part by those who are acceptable and those who are not – those who don't get chosen at recess, whose invitation to dances get turned down, who get blackballed and cold-shouldered or voted off the island. We exclude others out of pride or fear or out of our desire to feel superior. I was struck by this sense of exclusion when I returned on a flight heading back from Peru. The first class passengers were served gourmet food on china and crystal. Those in

coach ate snacks served in paper bags with plastic wrappers. First class had room to stretch and sleep. Those in coach sat in a space usually reserved for engaged couples in the back row of a movie theater. And once the plane got under way, a curtain was drawn to separate the two compartments. Like the Berlin Wall or the veil that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the Holy of Holies, the curtain was a reminder that some are privileged and some are not. And those who aren't should probably stay in their place.

In the act of exclusion, we tend to divide the world into "us" and "them," "master" and "slave," the "righteous" or "not." But Christ came as the great wall remover. His death broke down the temple barriers, dismantling the walls of hostility that has separated categories of people since the beginning of time. And any study of Jesus' life must convince us that whatever barriers we need to overcome in treating people differently can never compare to what He overcame when He descended to join us on earth. When Jesus' loved a guilt ridden person what He saw was a child who had strayed. And He understood that so much of our suffering is a result of what we are as fallen people. Now He could have said, "They made their bed, let them lie in it." But He didn't. Instead He chose to see through the surface of dirt and grime to the divine original which is hidden in every way, in every man.

As Paul wrote to the Romans, we are to "accept one another just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God." What this means is that we are to accept whom God accepts and see them through His eyes. God receives those who were formerly scarred by sin and unites them to Himself through the grace of the gospel. From the mulch pile come beautiful flowers. Through grace a derelict slave can become a herald for the kingdom. A slyster like Zacchaeus can be redeemed as a son of Abraham. A terrorist named Saul can become a chosen instrument to the Gentiles. And a privileged slave owner can learn that Christian charity extends to all persons, including slaves. So for Philemon to accept Onesimus is to extend the same grace he himself has received. This doesn't mean that Philemon must overlook the wrong done to him. God never calls us to blind tolerance. The wrong must be dealt with – through forgiveness.

B. Forgive the Wrong

So in verses 18-20 Paul writes, **"But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Yes, brother let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ."**

Paul laces his request to accept Onesimus with accounting language: "if he owes you, charge it to me, I will repay it." Paul absorbs the debt as his own and says, "I'll cover it from my own pocket." This is amazing when we consider the risk involved. Few of us would be willing to accept another's debt, especially if they were regarded as morally irresponsible. Furthermore, the pledge in verse 19, is legally binding. At this point, Paul must have taken out a pen, wrote out an I.O.U. and signed it with his signature. Now, he wasn't signing a contract he never intended to honor. The fact that Paul addresses this letter to the entire church and signs the note in his own hand shows that he intends for Philemon to treat his I.O.U. seriously. He is, in a sense, "putting his money where his mouth is." Then Paul does a curious thing. With the phrase "not to mention that you owe me your own self as well," he uses a rhetorical strategy by mentioning the very thing he says he won't.

Most likely you're familiar with this ploy when someone is trying to obligate you through guilt manipulation. My mom, bless her soul, used to say, "Now, Steven, I don't want to remind you how much we've done for you and your brother," and then she would list all the ways. I don't believe Paul's intent is to put a size 10 heal on Philemon's throat. That would be inconsistent with the character of this letter. But rather, Paul is reminding Philemon of the basis of their relationship. He's basically saying, "Hey, Philemon! Don't forget where you came from." Like Onesimus, Philemon was also brought to faith through Paul's ministry. So Paul, suddenly and skillfully, converts Philemon from a creditor, whose debt will be repaid in full, to a debtor, who cannot possibly repay the price of his life. But unlike the one created by Onesimus, this debt is not monetary but spiritual.

Onesimus owed his former master a debt. But aren't we all debtors to One greater than ourselves? Personally, I can't count the debt I owe. I'm in debt to God the Father for sending His Son on a mission of redemption for me. I deserved punishment but received forgiveness. I deserved wrath but got grace instead. I deserved stern lectures; what I received was the gift of mercy. This is something I could never repay. Not in a thousand years! Only Christ is big enough to carry my debt upon His shoulders. But what I can do, in appreciation for what He's done, is reflect the gift back to you. That's the only thing that makes sense!

Now when it comes to forgiveness we would all, probably, agree that it's a beautiful idea until we

have to practice it. But in the Lord's prayer, Jesus links our own need for forgiveness with our willingness to forgive others. This doesn't mean that God's forgiveness is dependent on our having forgiven others first. But we should never expect to receive what we are unwilling to give. I am not implying that forgiving those who have wounded us is as easy as flipping on a light switch. Forgiveness is tough! Henri Nouwen describes the process at work; "Forgiveness from the heart is difficult," he writes. "I have often said, 'I forgive you,' but even as I said these words my heart remained angry and resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that tells me I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return – if only the praise for being so forgiving! But God's forgiveness is unconditional; it comes from a heart that doesn't demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally it demands that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged, that wants to stay in control and put a few conditions between me and the one whom I am asked to forgive."

As people, we tend to shun forgiveness whenever it appears too costly. For Philemon, accepting Onesimus might cost him his reputation. He would appear weak – soft on slavery – and therefore a threat to a system that depends on the oils of fear and punishment to run smoothly. Such forgiveness crossed the grain of everything society accepted as normal. The typical Roman solution was the imminent threat of punishment. Any hint of leniency, they feared, would only lead to a greater degree of rebellion somewhere along the road. But forgiveness is the only way to break the cycle of oppression. So by forgiving Onesimus, Philemon would join in God's redemptive work in the lives of sinners. Now, you may be wondering why Onesimus would need forgiveness for trying to escape the dark oppression of slavery. Wasn't Onesimus the one victimized, and not Philemon? But this attitude fails to take seriously how we all – victim and perpetrator – are caught in a web of sin. Any oppressive system makes it impossible for anyone to be pure of heart and avoid harming others. Hurt people tend to hurt people. But most often we would prefer to regard ourselves as the one's wronged and fall short of seeing how we may have contributed to the conflict. It's so much easier to blame one party and consider the other blameless. In the context of Christian theology, however, both Philemon and Onesimus are sinners. And we can assume that because Onesimus has returned that he has

also forgiven Philemon of any wrongs. But before there can be restoration in the relationship both must repent and forgive any wrongs done by the other.

One of the problems with our church culture today is that forgiveness has become too sentimental; too trivialized. True forgiveness doesn't excuse sin. Nor does it brush it under a convenient spiritual rug. We may well keep the demons of remembrance at bay throughout the day, but they often run riot whenever we get quiet. The word "resentment" communicates what happens when the cycle goes uninterrupted. Resentment clings to the past injury. In fact, relives it over and over, picking each fresh scab so the wound never heals. We may even think we've buried the hatchet, while leaving the handle sticking out just far enough that it can be reached for whenever the next offense occurs. The breach then widens with every dawning day. Have you ever thought about what a world without forgiveness would look like? What if every child bore a grudge against his or her parents, and every family passed down feuds to future generations? Then we would all look like the Hatfields and McCoys, wouldn't we.

In her memoir of growing up in one such family, Mary Karr tells of a Texas uncle who remained married to his wife but didn't speak to her for 40 years after a fight over how much money she spent on sugar. So one day he took a lumber saw and sawed their house in half. He then nailed up the planks to cover the sides and moved one of the halves behind a grove of pine trees on the same acre of land. There the two, husband and wife, lived out the rest of their days in separate half-houses. Can you imagine? As absurd as this sounds, isn't that what we are often like? When we are reeling from some slight or injury, aren't we also tempted to stake out our territory, post no trespassing signs along the borders and hunker down in our anger? But the real problem with resentment is that it never gets what it wants; it never evens the score. On the contrary, it ties both parties to an escalator of pain. So how can we, as Christians, absorb harm without harming in return or allowing it to fester in our own hearts?

We must forgive. There is no other way. But if forgiveness is to happen, we must first honestly face the sin and how it has affected us. Then we must choose to release to God the debt that's due. And the only way that happens is when we become willing to look to the Cross. Without the Cross there is no forgiveness. When Jesus went to Calvary he provided the way for us. Tried at a mock trial. Abandoned by His closest friends. Denied three

times by Peter. Scoffed at and spit on. Physically tortured to die in utter humiliation, Jesus bore the burden of his sufferings with perfect integrity. He didn't blame or snivel, but in the midst of His pain, did something extraordinary: He granted forgiveness at the moment of humanity's deepest cruelty. He then echoed these words for all future generations to hear, "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do." In other words, like ourselves, those who crucified Christ were spiritually sick sinners. And so are those who injure us. But until we can see how great our own sin is, and how much grief it brings to God and others, we will never know how much it cost Christ to forgive us. Understanding the cost for our forgiveness gives us the courage and motivation to forgive others. As C.S. Lewis put it, "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has excused the inexcusable in you."

Will Philemon remember that he, also, is a bankrupt debtor who has been forgiven by God? Can he then accept God's forgiveness of Onesimus and accept him back as a brother? The only thing harder than forgiveness is its alternative. These are the choices God lays before us. Recently I read a story by Corrie ten Boom that is remarkable in this respect. Corrie watched in horror as the Nazi jailers brutalized her sister Betsie in the processing center at Ravensbruck. Many years later, after the war had ended, one of these jailers approached her after she had finished delivering a message for a church service in Munich. In her own words she writes, "He was the first of our jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain blanched face. His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; and I was going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness. And as I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. So I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His." Our part is to yield our injuries unto His care. And though Paul never once mentions the word forgiveness here he is encouraging Philemon to do the same.

C. Bestow a Blessing

The last, and perhaps most difficult, thing Paul asks of Philemon is to bestow a blessing upon Onesimus. This is the grand finale, a sure sign the work of forgiveness has been done. In verses 21-22 he writes, "**Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.**"

When we've been wounded, most often the cry of our hearts is, "Why should I? Why should I give time, energy, or even attention to someone who has offended me? Why should I share my life with someone who has shown no respect for it? I might be willing to forgive, but to give on top of that? Never!" And though all of us have probably empathized with that sentiment at one time or another, if we truly desire to restore a relationship then someone has to take the initiative. Loving actions always communicate in unmistakable terms the reality of our forgiveness and commitment to reconciliation.

Thomas Edison understood this principle well. When he and his staff were developing the incandescent light bulb, it took hundreds of hours to manufacture a single bulb. One day, after finishing a bulb, he handed it to a young errand boy and asked him to take it upstairs to the testing room. As the boy turned and started up the stairs, he stumbled and fell, and the bulb shattered on the steps. Instead of lecturing the boy, Edison reassured him and then turned to his staff and told them to start working on another bulb. When it was completed several days later, Edison powerfully demonstrated the reality of his forgiveness. He walked over to the same boy, handed him the bulb, and said, "Please take this up to the testing room." Imagine how that boy must have felt. He knew that he didn't deserve to be trusted with this responsibility again. Yet, here it was, being offered as though nothing had ever happened. Nothing could have restored this boy to the team more clearly, more quickly, or more fully. To bless those who have hurt us, deprived, or in other ways handicapped us, is the most extraordinary work any of us will ever do.

Paul anticipates Philemon's willingness to go the extra mile. His confidence is based on what he already knows and has heard about him. He trusts in Philemon's obedience, and to the command of love that under girds the entire letter. It is exactly the gospel of Christ that demands that those who have been blessed will then bestow the blessing on others. But what does the "even more" in verse 21 refer to? It could simply be a crowning gesture, like icing on a cake. It may refer to Paul's desire to have Onesimus returned into his service. Or it may imply that

Philemon will bless Onesimus with his freedom. Although we can only guess at what happened, Paul is confident that Philemon will free Onesimus so he might devote himself to God's calling. And since this letter was included in our canon, we can assume that Philemon did just that. Many believe that Philemon returned Onesimus to Paul in Rome, where he matured into a great man of God.

The historical evidence is suggestive of this. Fifty years later when Ignatius, one of the great Christian martyrs, was being transported from Antioch to Rome to be executed, he wrote letters to a number of churches. In writing to Ephesus he praised a certain bishop named Onesimus who had visited him. In the letter he even used the same pun on Onesimus' name as Paul. It appears likely that Onesimus, the runaway slave, had become, with the passing of years, the great Bishop of Ephesus. Coincidence? I'm not so sure! I am convinced, however, of the power of forgiveness to set free and restore lives such as his.

There is one last thing to notice. In verse 22, Paul requests that a guest room be prepared for him. In our culture, this would seem a bit pushy. For many think of hospitality as an inconvenience. As Ben Franklin once said, "fish and visitors usually smell after about three days." But in that culture, Paul would have used Philemon's home not as a vacation getaway but as a base from which to spread the gospel. They were fellow partners to the same Lord. Therefore, his arrival in Philemon's home would be a gracious answer to prayer rather than a serious imposition. This verse, then, is not an implied threat: "I will be coming, God willing, to see how you responded." If Philemon only complies because Paul threatens to make an inspection tour, then the letter has failed to do its work in motivating him to respond from love. This is not to say that accountability is not important. It's critical! All of us need to be held accountable to the forgiveness Christ requires – for our sake. But what we see in this letter is that the support structures are already in place and don't need to be restated.

Now, let me draw a quick distinction here. Forgiveness is between us and God. Reconciliation, on the other hand, requires a restoration of trust between two people. And depending on the severity of the wrong, may require a longer process of healing. Paul signs off the way he began, with greetings from the family of God. We can assume that each of them would vouch for Onesimus and agree with Paul's request on his behalf. Here again we see Paul's conviction that Christians are meant to live and act within the context of community.

For when we are joined in Christ, we are joined to one another. Paul brings his brief word to Philemon to a close with these words, "**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.**" At the beginning of the letter he had called upon grace for Philemon and his household. So it's only fitting that he comes back to this word once again in reference to Christ's free gift. In Christ the saving and sustaining love of God is poured out to every conflicted sinner throughout the bands of time.

CONCLUSION

During World War I, a German soldier ducked into an out-of-the-way foxhole. There he found a wounded enemy. The fallen soldier was soaked with blood and only minutes from his death. Touched by the man's plight, the German soldier offered him water. And through this small kindness a bond was created. The dying man pointed to his shirt pocket. So the German soldier took out a wallet and removed some family pictures. He then held them up so the wounded man could look upon his loved ones one final time. With bullets raging over them and war all around, these two enemies were, but for a moment, friends. What happened in that foxhole? Did all war cease to exist? Were all wrongs made right? No. What happened was simply this: Two enemies saw each other as humans in need of help. This is forgiveness. Forgiveness begins by rising above the war, looking beyond the uniform, and choosing to see the other, not as a foe or even as a friend, but simply as a fellow soldier longing to make it home safely. So what about you? Is there a wounded soldier in your path that God is calling you to get in a foxhole with? Then go, be reconciled, "forgive one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven you."

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