

LESSON TEXT: Philemon 1-25

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INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

William M. Thackeray (author of *Vanity Fair* and other works) and Charles Dickens, became rivals and estranged, toward the middle of the 19th century. Just before Christmas, 1863, they met in London, and were frigidly refusing to recognize one other. Suddenly, Thackeray turned back, seized the hand of Dickens, and said he could no longer bear the coldness that existed between them. Dickens was touched; they parted with smiles. The old jealousy was destroyed. Almost immediately afterward Thackeray died. Sir Thomas Martin later wrote, "The next time I saw Dickens he was looking down into the grave of his great rival. He must have rejoiced, I thought, that they had shaken hands so warmly a day or so before." Let us forgive TODAY! Tomorrow may be too late!

Philemon was written by the apostle Paul when he was under arrest at Rome about A.D. 57-61. Onesimus, a slave belonging to Philemon (a businessman of Colossae) had absconded with some of his master's property and had gone to Rome to lose himself in the crowds of that great city. In some way he came in contact with Paul and was converted (v. 10). Realizing the necessity of making right the wrong that Onesimus had done, Paul sent him back to his former master with this note (the book of Philemon) requesting that he be received and forgiven.

In this letter are found all the elements of forgiveness and reconciliation: (a) the offense (11,18); (b) compassion (10); (c) intercession (10,18,19); (d) substitution (18,18); (e) restoration to favor (15); (f) and elevation to a new relationship (16). Every aspect of the divine forgiveness of sin is duplicated in the forgiveness which Paul sought for Onesimus. This short letter is a practical lesson in the petition of the prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

"Forgiveness ought to be like a canceled note—torn up and burned up, and never mentioned again." —Henry Ward Beecher

QUESTIONS:

1. This NT epistle raises the issue of **slavery**--what does the NT say about slavery (1 Cor. 7:20-24; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22B4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; Philemon)?
2. Would an **instantaneous** and complete end to slavery in the Roman empire have been a service to God & society? What about America=s Civil War?
3. This epistle raises the question of **social justice**--is the reform of social evil (poverty, labor-injustice, racial-discrimination, pornography, gambling, etc.) the main work of the church? How did Paul seek to solve social wrong in this one case?
4. This letter raises the issue of **forgiveness** and reconciliation between people--what are the motives and bases for forgiveness and reconciliation?
5. This letter raises the issue of **tactfulness** versus harshness in dealing with the circumstances of others--name the ways Paul used tact with Philemon.
6. This letter raises the issue of producing goodness by **free choice** versus compulsion--cite other NT teachings or examples of this.
7. Was Paul's exhortation to Philemon to receive Onesimus back imperious?

This is a world of compensations; and he who would **be** no slave, must consent to **have** no slave. Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves; and, under a just God, can not long retain it.

--Abraham Lincoln in a letter, April 6, 1859

"Those who wallow in the imperfections of their society or turn them into an excuse for a nihilistic orgy usually end up by eroding all social and moral restraints; eventually in their pitiless assault on all beliefs they multiply suffering."

--Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1979