

Spiritual Characteristics of Forgiveness

This past week was a difficult one for most people in our country due to the uncertainty of the U.S. elections for president, the Senate, the House of Representatives, and on down the political chain. Many people are fearful and anxious about the election results. The news media has constantly featured people who complain about and vilify various politicians, groups, and individuals in an attempt to influence the nation. Name-calling, offensive language, and expressions of revenge have been common and acceptable among the pundits, news anchors, viewers, and politicians. Complete distortions, half-truths, gossip, and slander are no longer a surprise - except for the latest spin. Blatant lies are used because the acceptable standard is that the end justifies the means used to obtain what is wanted. We have witnessed the offended seeking revenge with cutting words and even violence rather than humbly offering forgiveness. Offense leads to offense to another offense.

My point is simple. We are not a nation of godly people from the highest to the lowest levels of our nation. We are not a united nation with a sense of family. Our study is in the book of Philemon, but before we go there, I want to make two points.

OUR NATIONAL LEADERS REFLECT THE SINS OF THE PEOPLE. The first point is that we have failed to realize that our national leaders, including political leaders, the media, celebrities, and pundits, are a reflection of the people in the

nation. We have heard them condemn the behavior of others as corrosive and immoral. The political left blames the political right and the right blames the left. People are blaming one another for the condition of our country. As a nation, we are an offended people who do not forgive. This is resulting in a wide range of evil behaviors. I have never seen our country more divided in my lifetime. This is true from the average man to our political leaders. My point is that the national leaders are like a mirror reflecting the immoral behavior of the people of the nation. They reveal our nation is drifting from God.

A blatant example of what we are seeing every day is found in Hosea 4:8-9. In this passage, God rebuked the priests of

Israel. It reads,

*They feed on the
sin of my people;
they are greedy
for their iniquity.
And it shall be
like people, like
priest;
I will punish them
for their ways
and repay them
for their deeds.
Hosea 4:8-9
(NASB)*



Notice that God rebuked the priests because they were like the people. He said, “like people, like priest.” God’s point is that the priests should have been examples of godly behavior but they were not. This gives us our first introductory point: “National leaders reflect the sins of the people.”

The language and behavior of our leaders reveal that as a nation we have rejected God and are looking to Washington D.C., as the god who people now expect to supply their needs. Their language is the easiest evidence of this. Jesus said that the

things that come out of our mouth reveal our heart (Matthew 15:18). As a nation, we have abandoned God. James Madison made this insightful comment at the establishment of the United States,

We have staked the whole future of American civilization not on the power of government, far from it. We have staked the whole of our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government, upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves according to the commandments of God. The future and success of America is not in this Constitution, but in the laws of God upon which this Constitution is founded. ~ James Madison

Ronald Reagan said it this way,

If we ever forget that we are one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under. ~ Ronald Reagan

Before we become discouraged, we must remember that God is still in control and He has a remnant called the faithful. As He is accomplishing His plan, we need to forgive others, share the gospel, and pray for the salvation of others. We need to be salt and light.

WE ARE A COMPLAINING AND UNFORGIVING PEOPLE. There are many sins we could talk about, but I want to focus on only one! The second introductory point is that as a nation we are a complaining and unforgiving people. An important biblical example is found in the story of Joseph and his eleven brothers. Joseph was favored by his father Jacob and as a result his brothers became jealous. Genesis 37:3-4 tells us,

Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms. Genesis 37:3-4 (NASB)

Here we are told that Joseph's brothers hated him and would not speak to him on friendly terms. The Hebrew word for "friendly" is actually *salom*, which means "peaceful." They

refused to be peaceful with him. One can imagine the gossip, slander, and ugly words that must have passed between them. Later, after Joseph had a dream, verse 8 states,

Then his brothers said to him, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Genesis 37:8 (NASB)

Their words dripped with contempt and bitterness. We are told they hated Joseph.

After Joseph had another dream, verses 19-20 tell us that his brothers planned to kill him.

They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer! Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!" Genesis 37:19-20 (NASB)

Notice Joseph's brothers called him a "dreamer." It is obvious Joseph's brothers had a critical spirit toward Joseph for a long time since all but one agreed to murder him and eventually sell him to the Midianite traders. What is amazing is that we read the story without being shocked. That is because we understand the brothers' emotions. We understand the offense and the lack of forgiveness. We have had similar experiences. Most likely they started gossiping, which led to slander and name-calling, then hatred and eventually murder in the heart. They were offended and the offense simmered like tea in a teapot until the teapot boiled. 2 Timothy 3:1-5 warns us that in the last days evil will explode. I want to read this passage and as I do, notice what Paul says at the end of the passage,

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips [or slanderous], without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. 2 Timothy 3:1-5 (NASB)

Here the apostle Paul warns us that in the last days evil will dramatically increase. He lists a series of sins that are increasing in our nation from the bottom to the top of society. Then he warns us to avoid such evil men. Why does he say that?

First, Romans 5:19 tells that everyone is born a sinner and as Romans 3:12 reminds us that,

... there is none who does good. Romans 3:12 (NASB)

What is the message? Men and women are sinners. We love sin and enjoy it. That is the message of Hebrews 11:25. Our sins influence others.

Second, Galatians 1:10 says that we want to be liked by others. This verse says that we conform in order to be liked, whether it is to a standard in the community, at school, in the church, or at home. That is a dangerous sin because we tend to conform to evil since we are sinners. Proverbs 20:19 is an example of what happens when we associate with evil people.

He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets,
Therefore do not associate with a gossip. Proverbs 20:19 (NASB)

The point is that if we associate with gossips, we will become like them. This is especially difficult in a family if someone is a gossip. How do you avoid a spouse or a child?

1 Corinthians 15:33 is more direct. It says,

Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals." 1
Corinthians 15:33 (NASB)

The Greek word for "bad" is *kakos*. Most of the time this word is translated as "evil." So we need to understand that we are to avoid evil people; otherwise, we will adopt their sinful behaviors. Every couple who has been married for fifty years understands the truthfulness of this statement. As the years go by, they increasingly become like each other. The message is that we become like those with whom we spend time. That is why Paul warned, "Avoid such men as these."

This helps us understand why we are seeing and experiencing the proliferation of evil in these last days. We see it in the people and in our national leaders! God said, "Like people, like

priest." Today we would say, "Like people, like leaders."

This means Christians must be careful that we are not like them. Such behavior must never be true of Christians because Ephesians 4:31-32 encourages us to be like Christ. Listen to these verses.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (NASB)

Why did I start this way? I wanted us to think about the sins of our nation, because our study is in the book of Philemon. The study is about offenses and forgiveness.

PURPOSE TO PHILEMON. The book of Philemon is a letter written by the apostle Paul to a man named Philemon. That is why this book is named Philemon. Unlike our letters, the opening verse and verses 9 and 19 tell us that the apostle Paul wrote this letter to Philemon about a slave he owned named Onesimus (v. 10). We will discover in this letter that Onesimus had run away and found Paul in prison in the city of Rome. In this letter Paul pleads for Philemon to forgive his run away slave. It will become apparent that Onesimus wronged Philemon in some way. So, Paul pleads for Philemon to forgive him. This letter is deeply emotional, very personal, and unique among Paul's letters.

INTRODUCTION TO PHILEMON. This is the first of two studies in Philemon. In this study we will discover four spiritual characteristics that are required for a believer to forgive another person. In the second study, we will learn the biblical principles necessary for forgiveness.

Philemon is listed among the four prison epistles, which are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. That means the apostle Paul wrote this letter while he was in chains in the Mamertine Prison in Rome, about A.D. 60-62. That is why Paul refers to himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus in verse 1. It says,

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to
Philemon our beloved fellow worker . . . Philemon 1 (NASB)

I believe that Paul intentionally calls himself a “prisoner of Christ” since he is writing to Philemon about a slave he owns. Paul is making the point that he serves Christ Jesus as a prisoner. Paul is not free to do as he pleases in prison. With this comment Paul prepared Philemon for his discussion about his slave who is in reality a “prisoner of Philemon.” So, I believe Paul is identifying himself with Philemon’s slave. This adds intrigue to the letter.

Paul also includes several people in these opening verses. First, he refers to Timothy as a partner in the ministry. Timothy also appears in the opening verses of several other letters: Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians and 2 Timothy. We know Timothy was a regular companion of Paul and we believe at one point in time Timothy was the pastor of the church in Ephesus. We also learn in this verse that Philemon was a believer since Paul refers to him as a “beloved fellow worker.”

In verses 2-3 Paul includes several other people whom we believe are members of Philemon’s family. Verses 2-3 say,

... and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Philemon 2-3 (NASB)

We believe that Apphia was Philemon’s wife. The only thing we know about her is that she was a Christian, since Paul calls her “our sister,” just as he also called Timothy “our brother.” We also believe that Archippus was a son of Philemon. Paul includes Apphia and Archippus since they were family members and he is going to be writing about Onesimus. It would be helpful to include all of the family members so that they were fully informed about Paul’s request.

Notice that we are told that a church met in Philemon’s home. Colossians 4:9 tells us that Onesimus was part of the church in the city of Colossae. In addition, Colossians 4:17 says that Archippus was involved in the ministry in this church in some way. This means that the church in Colossae met in Philemon’s home. Now we do not know what role Philemon had in the church, other than hosting it. But hosting is an important ministry all by itself! Since the church met in Philemon’s home, this suggests that Philemon was a wealthy

man since he also had a slave. Some believe he was the pastor of the church.

When we read a passage of Scripture such as this, we must ask, “Why did the Holy Spirit put it here?” Why did the Holy Spirit give us what appears to be unimportant details? Why shouldn’t we just skip this verse and go to the “good stuff”? The answer is that the detail helps us identify with Philemon. He was a wealthy family man with a wife and a son. He had a slave who in the Roman era would be more like a servant and who was protected by Rome against abuse. He was a Christian who was involved in his church in some way. In some ways he is like us.

Verse 3 is a typical greeting by Paul which varies slightly from letter to letter. But what is important about this greeting is that it connects both God the Father and Jesus Christ as the source of grace and peace. This is an affirmation that Jesus is God. It makes Jesus equal to the Father as the supplier of all our needs.

PAUL’S PRAYER FOR PHILEMON. When we come to verses 4-7, Paul becomes serious. He now shares with Philemon how he prays for him. As Paul shares his heart, these verses are like reading someone’s personal letter, text, or email when they are not looking! I rejoice the Holy Spirit gave this letter because it is an example about how to forgive. So let’s peek at Paul’s personal letter to Philemon. Beginning in verses 4-5, Paul says that he has been praying for Philemon’s spiritual character. Here are verses 4-5,

I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints . . . Philemon 4-5 (NASB)

Paul says that he always thanks God for Philemon and is repeatedly praying for him. So why did Paul do that? He tells Philemon, “I hear about your love and faith.” When he says, “I hear,” he uses a Greek participle which refers to repeated action. Because Paul had repeatedly heard about Philemon’s love and faith, Paul was encouraged to pray repeatedly for him about specific things. The fact that Paul told Philemon that he prayed for him should have been encouragement. I do that from time to time to encourage people. It communicates love

and care. I would encourage you to do the same!

We can be confident that Paul had heard about Philemon from Onesimus when he visited Paul in the Mamertine prison. Most likely he had heard also from Philemon's son Archippus since he was in communication with him according to Colossians 4:17. Paul may have known Philemon personally and had heard about him from other believers.

THREE SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS NECESSARY FOR FORGIVENESS. Beginning with verses 5 and 6, Paul mentions four spiritual characteristics that must exist in a believer in order for forgiveness to occur. This will be helpful for all of us, especially for those who struggle with dealing with offenses and having difficulty forgiving others. In verse 5, Paul actually praises Philemon for the first two spiritual characteristics. I am sure that Philemon was encouraged by Paul's upbeat words.

In our English Bibles, verse 5 is mixed up like scrambled eggs with bacon and cheese because it has a chiasmus structure. It has a A-B-B-A pattern. That is, the first part connects to the last part and the middle statements connect together. In this verse Philemon's love connects with the saints in this church and this faith connects with the Lord Jesus. It is important for us to remember that love and faith always go together.

1ST SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTIC — FAITH IN THE LORD JESUS IS NECESSARY TO FORGIVE. In the priority order of love and faith, faith comes first. Therefore, Paul praises Philemon that he has faith toward the Lord Jesus. This means that at some point in his life, he believed in Jesus as Savior and Lord. This is great news. For without the Holy Spirit, there is no power to defeat sin according to Romans 8:13-14 and Galatians 5:15-22. Without the Holy Spirit, there is no power to overcome offenses and forgive others. Galatians 5:20 says the flesh wants to commit,

... idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions ... Galatians 5:20 (NASB)

But with the Holy Spirit dwelling within, victory over such sins is possible. Also, without faith in Jesus, there is no desire to please the Lord Jesus. Philemon had this essential characteristic. Only those who have faith in Christ will truly be able

to forgive when offended. This is the first spiritual characteristic necessary for forgiveness.

2ND SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTIC — LOVE FOR THE SAINTS IS NECESSARY TO FORGIVE. The second spiritual characteristic necessary for forgiveness is love for the saints. Once again Paul praises Philemon that he has love for the other believers who meet in his home. 1 Corinthians 13:1 reminds us that a believer who lacks love is like a "noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" in the ministry. Paul praises Philemon that he is not a noisy gong. He was effective in ministry. Since love is mentioned first in the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, this is evidence Philemon was a believer. What is also true is that an absence of love reveals someone does not belong to Christ. This should have been encouraging to Philemon. Philemon had love for the saints in the body of Christ. He had the second spiritual characteristic necessary for forgiveness. Paul's praise should have encouraged him to love even more!

3RD SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTIC — SENSE OF FAMILY BECOMES MORE REAL. The third spiritual characteristic is found in verse 6.

... and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. Philemon 6 (NASB)

Verse 6 is a continuation from verse 4. Verse 5 was a parenthesis. In verse 6 Paul does not praise Philemon as he reveals a problem that Philemon had. Paul challenges Philemon when he says that he had been praying Philemon's relationship with the rest of the body of Christ in his church would become more effective or more real. The NASB says "the fellowship of your faith." The Greek word that is translated as "fellowship" is *koinonia*. It is translated as "sharing" in the ESV. That is a poor translation. The meaning of *koinonia* is difficult to capture in the English. It is often translated as fellowship, association, communion, or participation. In order to communicate the meaning of this word, we need to understand that sometimes this word was translated as a "marriage contract." Husbands and wives belong to each other. That describes the closeness that should exist in the body of Christ. We belong together.

That describes a close relationship that should exist within the church. The best explanation is that *koinonia* refers to “closest of all relationships.” In Ephesians 1:5 we are reminded that every believer has been adopted into the family of God. We are a family that will spend eternity together.

Notice that Paul added the word “effective” to his encouragement. The Greek word “effective” has the sense of active or powerful. He is praying that Philemon would be powerfully committed to those in the church family in his home. He is preparing Philemon for his request that he would forgive his runaway slave who had wronged him. This reminds us of Acts 2:42 which describes the commitment or *koinonia* of the early church,

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2:42 (NASB)

They were devoting themselves to one another. So Paul urged Philemon to be even more committed to the family of saints in the church than he had been in the past. This was not true of Philemon. Philemon needed to stretch himself and be even more committed to his family.

Then Paul added, “through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you.” Here Philemon was urged to be committed according to the knowledge of that which he already knew was biblically good and not react just according to his emotions. He needed to think with his head and not with his feelings. Once again, Scripture urges us to know Scripture; this time so that we know how to love one other.

Now let me challenge you and speak personally. This is an important and powerful spiritual characteristic, which I am afraid is missing in the lives of some believers. For some of us, there is no real commitment toward others in the body of Christ. Some of us focus on the pastor, our leaders, and our friends. We ignore the visitors and newcomers because, frankly, we do not know them and have no relationship with them. I want you to think about Paul’s challenge to Philemon to become powerful in establishing a close bond with each other. We will be spending eternity together.

I want you to notice that I started this message by talking

about the name-calling, offensive language, expressions of revenge, hatred, strife, self-centeredness, and the lack of forgiveness in our nation. I wanted to make you sensitive not just to the division that exists in our country but to the lack of unity among the people in this nation. Our nation is at war within itself. I want us to be sensitive to the fact that the early church acted like a family that belonged and supported one another, brothers and sisters in a new relationship called the body of Christ. God the Father had adopted them and us. We are His family too! I want us to sense that our commitment or *koinonia* to each other must be strong so that we do not treat one another as those in the world do by holding offenses and refusing to forgive. Christians must not be like what we are witnessing in our nation. Instead, Christians must forgive each other. It is unthinkable that Christians might not forgive each other, because Christ has forgiven us! If we do not, something is wrong with our faith in the Lord and our love for the saints. This gives us the third spiritual characteristic: the sense of family becomes more real.

4TH SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTIC — DO IT ALL FOR CHRIST’S SAKE. Our final spiritual characteristic is that we are to do this for “Christ’s sake.” These are the four spiritual characteristics of one who will forgive others in the body of Christ. The national leaders and a majority of the people in the world may not behave in this way. We may not want to forgive when our feelings are hurt, but we want to forgive because Jesus wants us to forgive.

CONCLUSION. Verse 7 concludes this study. Paul wrote,

For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother. Philemon 7 (NASB)

Paul emphasizes Philemon’s love for the saints who meet in his home. Philemon had faith in the Lord Jesus and love for the saints, but something was missing. He needed more love for the brethren. A sense of closeness, belonging and commitment for one another was missing. May I ask you to check your spiritual barometer? What would Paul say about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for those here in this church? Are you like the people we see on television and read about daily?

Are you highly committed to one another? Do you love one another like family? Is there someone you have not forgiven? Is there someone in this church to whom you do not want to speak? If so, it is time to assess the four spiritual characteristics necessary for forgiveness. In our next study, we learn how to forgive. May God bless you as you reach out in love to your fellow believers.