

Costly Forgiveness

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, so we're going to look this evening at a few verses in this short letter, very short letters. Thomas said last week, probably the most important theological letter that Paul wrote because of the way his understanding of the Bible and of Jesus Christ and of theology is outworked practically. So I'm going to read verses 17 to 19 in Philharmon. And Paul, and I'm going to focus on that. So if you consider me your partner, receive him, that is Anesimus, the runaway slave. Receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge it to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay it to say nothing of your owning me, even your very self. And that's what we're going to look at these verses tonight as part of this short letter that

Paul wrote to the church in Colossae and to Philharmon, one of the leaders of that church in particular. Now I think it's true for most of us that if you like fruit at all, you really like ripe, sweet fruit, mature fruit, fruit that's just, sometimes I think we talk about ripe fruit being, or mature fruit being overripe and we don't like that because it gets a bit soft and squidgy and it's not so good. But a fruit that's perfect is just beautiful to eat. It's good to look at a peach or an apple or any kind of fruit that's really ripe, but it's good to look at and it's even better to eat. It's matured and it's ready for us to enjoy. I remember growing up, I think I've probably said this before here, in Forbes Road in Edinburgh in the months that they had then, and there was big trees in the garden and there was a couple of huge, big pear trees which were brilliant for climbing, but desperately bad for eating, not the trees, the pears, because the pears never seemed to ripen. They were always small and they were always hard as rock. They were great for throwing at the neighbours, but they were just useless for eating. And that was a shame because a really, a nice pear is good, a mature and sweet pear is good, but these pears were really crunchy and hard and a bit bitter. And spiritually, the same is true of us as Christians. When we're matured, when we're bearing the fruit of the Spirit, then we are sweet and we're not bitter and hard. And what we recognise and we see that, that Paul is not only in his own life, but as he's trying to speak into the life of this church of which Philoman is a leader, he's wanting to bring them to maturity, to fruitfulness as Christians, and that's the same aim that he has for us in our lives. So in Colossians 1, which is the kind of sister letter as it were to this one, Colossians 1 verse 26, we have these words, to them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. So he's speaking about Christ in our lives. It's in him we proclaim wanting everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ. So that's his aim. That's the aim of the

Apostles, the aim of the teaching of the New Testament, and it's the aim of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in us to bring us to maturity, and that is to completeness so that we understand really what it means to have Jesus in our lives as we mature. And that comes from, I'm going to say this twice because it's an important sentence, it comes from recognizing who you experience and what you experience. So maturity comes from when we recognize who we experience, that is Jesus, in what we experience, good or bad. Whatever the circumstance is in, we're looking to see what Jesus is teaching us, how he can change us and mature us so that we grow up in our faith in Jesus Christ. You see, you can be a Christian for many, many years, be an old Christian and be as sour as these pairs that I was speaking about at the beginning, shallow and bitter and sour and legalistic, not really allowing the experiences of life to transform your heart towards Jesus Christ. Or you can be young in the faith and sweet because from the beginning maybe you've let Christ deal with your heart and you've let His light shine in the dark corners of your heart to transform it. The jackpot is when we get people who are old and sweet, who have been in the faith a long time and who also allow the gospel to continually transform their heart. There's nothing to be an old and sweet Christian and I don't necessarily mean age but it can be at age as well. Someone who's been a Christian, there's a degree of age in it obviously, someone who's been a Christian a long time, who's allowed the gospel to always work on in their hearts and for us all we're aiming for complete maturity ourselves and a students of faith. So in many ways this letter is dealing with that need for being mature as Christians and as a church.

And I think nearly always a mature church is a church and a mature Christian is one who recognizes that that is outworked relationally as we love God and as we love one another.

The sign of a mature gospel community, the church, isn't just good theology or good preaching or the level of giving that you have or the numbers attending or whether you plant churches or the number of young people in the church or even prayer meeting attendants, now all of these things are maybe significant. But the mark of a mature gospel community is how well they forgive each other and how honestly they apply grace to their own hearts and to their own relationships. Their families, their church family, their work relationships and how they take these experiences and allow Jesus Christ to transform them, good or bad. A people who are reborn, a people who are becoming more mature, changing.

[7 : 00] So one of the things that I want to leave with you tonight is the importance of do you have anything in your life that allows you to note, to be aware of whether there's maturing happening in your life? Do you look at your relationships and say, well, I've reacted and I've forgiven differently this year than I would have a year ago or 18 months ago. There's a growth in grace. I'm less impatient. I'm less unforgiving. I'm bearing more fruit rather than thorns in that relationship. And it's important that we are able to look at our lives in that way, in our marriages, with our children, with our colleagues at work.

It's that maturing into the mess which is life, because that's what we have, isn't it? We sometimes. It's not all neat and tidy and ordered. We get let down. Circumstances for us can be grim. People can annoy us. We don't get on with people. We are sinned against.

We can't be bothered. We can't be bothered with the church, with Christians, with the family, with others. And when the heat of that comes, are we bearing thorns or are we bearing fruit? Do we find ourselves in these times what's in our heart coming out? Maybe we're defensive or we badmouth others or we walk away or we grumble or we hate or we judge.

Or do we let grace and the light of grace teach us and mold us and transform us so that we understand the cost of our being forgiven and what that involves in our relationship with others? That helps us to measure the growth in our Christian lives, and that's important. How we forgive others, how we deal with difficulties and difficult people and difficult ways that we have been sinned against helps us to understand a little bit more about Christ at work in us.

Now, there's a wealth of maturity in this letter. It's brilliant. Paul is not preaching cheap grace to a filament in this letter at all. It's been wrought in the fires of loving commitment to each other and a deep understanding of what forgiveness means for them. In the toughest of circumstances, Paul is writing this letter, and his own experiences come out in it, I think, both in his relationships and sometimes the mistakes he's made himself in the past.

[9 : 53] Because what we see, and we see it particularly, I want to focus on these few verses, we see that there are relationships in this letter that have been challenged by God's grace.

And that's important. We see it with Paul and filament together in the kind of relationship they had. So they had a deeply wrought friendship, okay? Paul was great at friendships, and you'll find that we'll probably be repeating ourselves a little bit over this four weeks, but it's really worth repeating. He calls filament his fellow worker in verse 1, and that just a term, just, you know, they were sharers, they were companions, they were joint participants together, they had a committed partnership in the Lord. So he doesn't come and it's one of the few letters he doesn't come saying, I'm Paul, the apostle, and I'm coming with this important message. He doesn't call himself a shepherd or the preacher, he just calls himself a fellow worker with this filament who's a leader in the church in Colossia.

There's no hierarchy, there's no lording it over this friend that he has. There's clearly, there's clearly, you can see it right through the letter, there's clearly great love, great friendship, great sacrifice. It's been costly for Paul to give of himself into this church and into this man's life. And as he writes this letter to him, he's risking that, he's risking that friendship, he's risking that commitment they've had together because he's asking him to do something really outrageous in accepting back and forgiving this runaway slave who's become a Christian as we'll see more of. Now that's the kind of leaders we want in the church. The minister doesn't lard it over people, doesn't, you know, make himself more important and more significant. We're fellow workers, we're fellow laborers, we're sharing together, we're giving of our hearts and of our lives to one another. That's the kind of mature church that we want to be. And for filament as well with Paul, we see that Paul recognizes there's a great debt in the relationship together, you know, you know, he says that, you know, you owe me your very self. Now, filament knew that it was

God who redeemed him. He knew that it was Christ who was his Savior and that he was all to Christ. But yet, Christ saves filament through the message and the work of Paul and the preaching of Paul so much so that he can say he owes his life from a human point of view to Paul. Paul gave time and energy and love and the gospel message was shared with filament and there's this great debt of love that he owes to Paul as he receives this letter.

And again, that's a great lesson for us when we think about what if we want to be mature believers in a mature church that we don't just say, oh, well, it was Jesus that converted me and I was saved by grace by God alone. He uses people and we humanly speaking, you know, I owe my life to the church and to the preachers who spoke the gospel of grace to me. And we're all the same. We owe so much to the community of believers, to the worshiping people, to the preachers who brought us the gospel. Is it easy for us then to go and rubbish that? To rubbish the gospel community when it hurts me and where it lets me down? We think about the debt that we owe, the debt that we owe and the appeals that Paul makes here on the basis of love to filament. So there's a cost involved in the background in all of this going on here. But we see there's also a cost in this act of forgiveness and what happens from it for Paul himself with onesimus, the runaway slave who's left filament and who has found his way to Paul's prison and has become a Christian. Verses 12 and 13 speak about that joy and that loss that he has. You know, he was useless but now he's useful and I'm sending him back. So, you know, there's a cost to what's happening to this reconciliation that has to happen. Paul's in prison. He's lonely. He's in chains. He's isolated. Now, I don't know how Thomas might know this looking back in it. I'm not sure if any of us know how exactly onesimus ended up in Rome and how he ended up in the prison.

[14 : 48] I mean, was he imprisoned? We don't know. Or was he just visiting or did he become a Christian before that? We don't know. But somehow by God's amazing providence, Onesimus ends up as a friend of Paul in prison a thousand miles away from Colossae. And he tells this story and he becomes a believer maybe through Paul's speaking to him or maybe through the church in Rome. And Paul says, who are you with? Phil, Philoman in Colossae. I know Philoman.

He's a great friend. It was through my preaching that Philoman became a believer. And so there's this amazing, as we often experience in life, amazing providence of God bringing people together.

And he would love to keep him Onesimus because he's a friend and a companion and like almost a substitute friend from Philoman in prison. But he wants to give him, but he knows he has to go back. There's a cost to him becoming a Christian. He needs to be reconciled to his old boss, to his old one to whom he was a slave. And you see that, and that's what it's like sometimes, isn't it? It's like that for Paul. It's like that for us. There's great joy in birthing someone to faith. And then they have to go and they have to move away or they have to go somewhere else. And you've given your heart and Paul had given his heart and he would love his company, but he has to move on. And more than that, he's willing even to pay as he writes in the letter of, if Onesimus has stolen money from Philoman as he ran away, then Paul's willing to pay that. So there's even a physical cost as it were. But he knows, he knows that Onesimus needs to go back. He knows that it's going to be awkward for him. He knows there's going to be tension. He himself is going to lose out on it. But he puts Christ and he puts other people before his own comfort and before his own friendships that he's developed here. And then also we see that there's a cost to this act of reconciliation and forgiveness for Onesimus and Philemon together, Philoman.

Onesimus has become a Christian by the amazing grace of God. He'd run away. He was in Rome. And now Paul's saying, you go back, take this letter with you, hand it. Who? Who's going to hand it to? To the leader of the church in Colossae, Philoman, who's the slave owner that he's run away from. That would be the last thing, I guess, that he wanted to do.

Because there's not just reconciliation, there's not just forgiveness here. There's also reconciliation. I guess he just didn't want to face up to that. You know, if you'd been in that situation, I'm forgiven by God, I'll just make a fresh start somewhere else.

[17 : 53] I'll avoid it. And isn't that what we often do? We avoid difficult consequences of our forgiveness. We avoid reconciliation. We just maybe make a fresh start. And we avoid the people that have hurt us in the past or that we've let down. We don't think of making amends.

And for philemon, he is not just to forgive onesimus, but to accept him as he would accept Paul, who he regards as a brother. Now remember, philemon was probably wealthy. The church probably met in his home. He was a leader of that church. There would be all kinds of personal, professional, cultural, and probably church pressure to deal with philemon, to deal with onesimus who came back, this runaway slave. Oh yeah, he's become a Christian. Oh, that's convenient. That's what they all say when they're in prison. And there would have been doubt and there would have been professional questions to say, no, don't accept him back or make him pay or make him give restitution. But Paul's saying, oh, look, I don't even want you to take him back as an employee or a slave, as it were. I don't want it just to be bald for giving us or tolerating him or when he comes to church, say hello to him at the door. I want you to treat him like you owe him your very life like you did to me. There's a great cost. I want you to make him a friend, one who you accept as a brother, not as a slave. That's utterly and completely costly forgiveness. But it's a great picture of a mature believer, which if we want to take it into our own lives, mature believers and a mature church, there's a fantastic challenge there for us to understand the gospel community, that forgiveness is something we trip off our tongues. We believe theologically, oh, but boy, until we're hurt, until someone bad mouths us, until we don't like something, then we find forgiveness very difficult. And we find it far too costly. Oh, we love the words. We love the prayers. But very often the light that shines into the grubby and the unforgiving nature of our hearts is too great to bear sometimes. And much more so for us as leaders, Philoman was a leader in the church, and as leaders, the remaining sinful nature in us, whether it's leaders in a business context or a church context, we have a tendency to control, a tendency to be defensive, to abuse our power, to be distant, to think we're important. And yet that was not so with this church, this mature church where Paul didn't play the apostle card. He recognized that Philoman was a brother who needed to involve himself in expensive, costly forgiveness. It wasn't just a kind of paper exercise. He was going to need to take Onesimus into his home as a family member, this runaway slave who'd probably stolen from him, as we've seen in previous weeks.

So that's a picture of a mature Christian and of a mature church. And just briefly in conclusion, we see that mature church throughout this letter. We see it in the way Paul, at the very beginning, reminds us that the letters from him and from Timothy. So I presume in that they discussed things, they discussed this matter together. They talked and probably prayed about it. I don't think Paul was acting on his own here. He was seeking God's wisdom from another leader, Timothy. And that's wise leadership and we should always learn from that. We should learn to, in difficult situations when we're maybe asked to forgive and to gracefully that we seek counsel about it and we seek wisdom and the wisdom of others. We also see, and this was mentioned before by, in the last couple of weeks, I think, it was mentioned by Thomas that there was transparent honesty in this church. This is a very personal letter, isn't it? Being asked to do something very, very challenging, but it's written to the whole, it's written to him, but also to the whole church. The whole church read it. So it wasn't to be something that Philharmonists kind of did quietly. Okay, I'll do that quietly on my own. No one needs to see. The whole church was kind of, were on the sidelines watching how he would respond as a leader in this situation. Isn't that so refreshing? See, the leader was put on this spotlight and say, well, let's see what, you know, you preach forgiveness all the time. Let's see what it's really like with Onesimus. It wasn't secretive, it wasn't private or individualistic. He was being challenged in front of that gospel community. Beautiful, really. And that's the sign of a mature church, mature leadership and the mature people. They wouldn't have been looking to catch him out, but they would be looking for him to set an example.

But I think the greatest thing we see here in terms of maturity is what Paul says in verse 18, where he says, if he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account. Charge it to me. Now that really summarizes everything about the gospel because it comes from the very heart of God. Because God says that, doesn't He? When He looks at you and when He looks at me, the Father looks at you and me and Jesus says, charge it to me. Charge their grubby, sinful, selfish hearts to me. But before the foundation of the world that has been the mind and the heart of God. It's the nature of His love. It's so other-centered.

It cost Him the infinite depth of forsakeness of the cross that we can never fathom so that when I stand before God and you stand before God and I feel and I sense my sin and my guilt, I hear Jesus saying, charge it to me. Or it's been charged to me. I've paid the price. I've covered the cost. They're forgiven. And that, you see, is what makes Paul a mature believer because he can say exactly the same, charge it to me. He can say that about money that Onesimus might owe, but he knows that there's far more to that, isn't it? That there's a debt that Christ has paid, that Philoman needs to recognize, and that Paul recognizes too. It's the essence of grace, not my will, but yours be done. The essence of grace is other-centered, not self-centered. It is worshiping and loving God and loving others. It's sharing our hearts and our lives with those who let us down, who frustrate us, who annoy us, who sin against us because we have done all that to Jesus and He said, charge it to me. That's how we become mature when we see that and let that light shine into the grubby corners of our hearts. So the gospel community, the church community, which we battle so hard to develop and maintain and live out here, is not just a Sunday morning experience, a

[26 : 03] Sunday morning sing-along, or a Wednesday evening theology lesson or prayer time. It's an investment in people's lives. It's becoming a kingdom of heaven community. However difficult that is to work out when we're split apart and we're all over the city, apart from anything else, where we play our part on a week-to-week basis in reconciling and forgiving and having long, short memories about the sins of others and long memories of the grace of God in our own hearts, where we are repaying, healing, restoring, encouraging, challenging what it means to understand grace at work in our lives. That's when we are a fruit bearing community.

That's why I say that that's real fruit. That's where the rubber really hits the road. It's relational. It's how important you regard the people you will spend eternity with here and now. It's whether you rubbish them or whether they're insignificant or all that matters is me and God, whereas all of the commands point towards our loving Him and loving one another. But that's the sign of a mature and a healthy community, a healthy growing one.

It's so costly. It involves so much generosity. It involves not quickly jumping to the wrong conclusions or attributing the worst of motives. It's three-dimensional forgiveness. So you can recall your life and I can look at my life and we can measure whether there's been any growth in our life. Since maybe it's right, let's take it from the beginning of the lockdown. Has there been any growth? The measure of maturity is how willing we are to say like Paul, charge it to me. Let me be wronged. Let me be the one who forgives. Let me be patient. Let me bear fruit. When the trials come, may it not be thorns but may it be fruit that we bear. I think that's hugely significant because that will enable us to be a sweet people, not a sour people. I think the history of the church is so checkered, isn't it? I think that's what it will always be and we just battle with that. But we really want to be a sweet people. We want to be a mature people and that is costly. The theme of the title of this sermon was costly forgiveness. There's no doubt it's costly. It's easy to accept from God, isn't it? Of course it is. It's the best thing. It's free and it's the most wonderful thing to be forgiven. It's the hardest thing to hand out to others. That's where our great battle lies. And Paul and Philharmon here, and Paul is absolutely convinced Philharmon will do more than he even asks here because he knows him. He's committed to him. There's that costly friendship that says, well, I know how Philharmon was. If someone wrote this to you, how would you react? What a cheek. How before he's asking me to do that? It's how could I possibly forgive? And maybe we wouldn't know the person who's asking us very well. We might not know the leader of the church very well or if someone said it to me. But isn't it interesting that there was obviously so much investment in that relationship between Paul and Philharmon that he could say, look, do this. I know you will. I trust you will. He knew he would pay the price because he knew that he was mature and that he understood grace. It's not a wonderful coming and going in a church that we know each other enough that we are willing to challenge one another about being forgiving and paying the price of what it means to be a Christian. I wonder if we can do that. That's a great challenge.

And it's a great comfort to know that God will help us to do that. And that makes us sweet. So when we're tempted to remember the two different responses, are we going to be sour or sweet? Amen. Let's pray. Father God, help us not to be sour Christians. So easy.

It's so easy to talk a good game, especially for ministers and for preachers. So easy for us to just say as it should be, but either with each other or denominational or in the church to be sour, irrelationally, so easy. Forgive us when that is the case, Lord. And forgive us when as a church we find it easy to criticize and condemn and not pay the price of understanding what it is that we have received from Jesus. And therefore, our grace is free, but it isn't cheap. And help us to recognize the cost of that in our daily relationships, the way that we are asked to forgive and to not just bear forgiveness, but treating one another like brothers and sisters, reminding ourselves that we will spend eternity together.

[31 : 32] And therefore, we're to start being like heaven here. Lord, help us to know that. And help us to start being like a community of heaven here, because I know that will be attractive to a lost world. And I pray for our friends and for our neighbors who don't know you, that somehow they may see this community at work and be attracted when maybe all they are hearing on maybe in the workplace or on social media is division and nastiness and judgment and separation. May they find in the church community something very different that's not made up or is not false or is not put on, but comes from people whose hearts are being wrought, worked at with all the pain and the cost of rooting out sin so that we become more like Jesus. It's a painful healing. We know that, but help us to be willing to pay that price, to be mature, to be sweet, to be beautiful. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.