FBS “One Hit Wonders: Racial Reconciliation & Forgiveness” 6-18-17

Joel Breidenbaugh (Philemon)

**Intro.** (walk up to “Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye” by Steam, 1969). There were several “One Hit Wonders” in the 1960s, including “Who Put the Bomp” by Barry Mann (61), “Just One Look” by Doris Troy (63), “Wipe Out” by the Surfaris (63), “Hippy Hippy Shake” by Swinging Blue Jeans (64), “Stand by Me” by Spyder Turner (67) & let us not forget “Tip Toe through the Tulips” by Tiny Tim (68). The Bible has what I call 5 “One Hit Wonders”—single chapter books which, though brief, pack a powerful message. Today we look at Philemon & address the topic of “Racial Reconciliation & Forgiveness.”

Theme: Obedience, service & forgiveness

Background: While the Apostle Paul was imprisoned in Rome around AD 60-61, he wrote the letters of Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. Philemon was a brother in Christ who lived in Colossae. At some point, one of his slaves, Onesimus, had run away & met Paul. While with Paul, he came to faith in Christ. Paul returned him to his owner but asked Philemon to forgive him of any debt, i.e. set him free.

* Before we go too far, let me clarify a few matters pertaining to New Testament slavery. It had little to do with American slavery, for in the NT times, as much as 1/5 of the Roman world (& 1/3 in Italy) had become slaves at some point. Because they didn’t have credit back then, if someone went into debt, they could become employed to another person as a slave to work for a few years until they paid off their debt. NT slavery is closer to an employer-employee relationship than our form of American slavery, because they got paid & could work toward their freedom (similar to paying off debt & stocking up & retiring in American society).
* Christians have looked to this letter, however, & wrongly used it in the past on the subject of slavery in the 19th century. Southern Christians said, “The Bible supports slavery, because Paul sent a slave back to his owner.” Northern Christians said, “The Bible supports abolition because Paul called for Philemon to release Onesimus.”
* Though we are a long way from 19th century American slavery, I want to make some application concerning “Racial Reconciliation & Forgiveness” today, because Americans think of slavery as a black & white issue & we still have a ways to go to achieve racial reconciliation. There is only one race—the human race—but there are different ethnicities. Christians must lead to the way in our country if we are ever going to achieve “Racial Reconciliation & Forgiveness.”
* **Ways to Build Bridges toward Racial Reconciliation & Forgiveness:**

**1. Thank God for your friend in the faith & pray for him (4-7)**

* This is foundational to your friendships in the faith, including friendships with different ethnicities

**a. Pray for his faith in the Lord Jesus (5)**

* Paul thanked God for Philemon & how he was growing in the faith
* We should pray for our friends to grow in their relationship with Jesus

**b. Pray for his love for Christians (5)**

* Paul had heard of Philemon’s love for all the saints & thanked God for that love
* We should pray that our friend’s love for other believers grow & that they would want to be part of a church family where they can grow in their love & commitment to others

**c. Pray for his witness to be effective for Christ (6)**

* Paul prayed for Philemon to be an effective witness—shouldn’t we pray the same?

Illus: Of all the things we pray for our friends—their family, their health, their job, etc.—how often do we actually pray for these areas of their lives—to grow in their faith in Jesus, to grow in their love for other believers, to be effective in their witness? When those things are done, it brings a pastor joy like it brought Paul joy (7)

**2. Tell your friend in the faith when he is wrong (8-22)**

**a. Be direct in Christ (8-16)**

**1) Out of boldness toward & love for your friend (8-12)**

* Paul was direct toward Philemon, boldly addressing Philemon forgiving Onesimus, but he emphasized love
* If you have a friend & you can’t be direct with him when he’s wrong, then you aren’t much of a friend

Illus: I had a deacon friend in a previous church I served who was raised to think he was better than African-Americans. He would say things in private on occasion & I would correct him—he would say, “You’re right, but I have to fight these views of mine I was raised with”

**2) Out of concern for the mistreated (13-16)**

* Onesimus means “useful” or “beneficial”—Paul uses a play on words—Onesimus was formerly useless to Philemon after he ran away, but he became useful to both Paul & to Philemon as a believer

**a) Slavery & racism are wrong**

* While slavery wasn’t a race issue in NT times, slavery became a skin color issue in America & it has carried over to different levels of racism still today

Illus: SBC began over racism & slavery but we have repented & we continue to work to make it right—even at our latest annual meeting, we again voted to decry racism in our country

* Racism still exists in our country & Christians should lead the way in calling for its end—the Alt-Right movement & white nationalism & supremacy should be called out & repentance must come from such pride & arrogance
* White Americans, more than anybody, need to be reminded that Jesus wasn’t white & He came to die for the sins of every ethnicity & skin color & language & socio-economic standing. Whites will be greatly outnumbered in heaven.

**b) Repentance & forgiveness are needed**

* That Onesimus returned to Philemon showed he had repented from running away & Paul urged Philemon to forgive him
* When racism occurs & harm is done & then repentance is made, we need to remember that God is still saving the lost & forgiving sins & we should forgive, too

Illus: “Reconciliation only takes place when both the offending and the offended parties do their respective parts” (O.S. Hawkins, 128)

**b. Be sacrificial, if necessary, remembering Christ’s sacrifice (17-20)**

* Paul goes so far to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus & is willing to sacrifice whatever he owes—he is willing to stand in his place
* How can Paul make such a commitment? Because he remembered Christ made a tremendous sacrifice in paying for our sin debt & He stood in our place to offer us forgiveness & set us at peace with God through repentance & faith
* You may need to act sacrificially for a friend or stand up when a minority is being mistreated, even if it means you are hurt in the process for another

**c. Be encouraging of his obedience to Christ (21-22)**

* Paul was confident Philemon would honor his request & more & told him of his plans to visit to check on him
* So did Philemon honor Paul’s request & set Onesimus free? Yes, or else the letter probably would have been burned & the matter forgotten. Since we have record of it & it was included in the canon of Scripture, you can count on Onesimus being forgiven!

**Conc.** Corrie Ten Boom was thrown into a Nazi concentration camp during WWII for being a Christian who hid Jews in Germany. Her sister Betsy died in that camp. Corrie wrote *The Hiding Place*, which has also been made into a movie. She relates that years after the atrocities she was invited to speak in a church in Munich. It was there she came face to face with him, the former Nazi who stood watch at the shower door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. She could never forget that face. Suddenly, it all flashed back…the room full of mocking, jeering men…the heaps of clothing piled in the corner…and Betsy’s pained and tormented face. He approached her after the service had concluded with a radiant smile. “Fraulein,” he began, “I am most grateful for your message. To think that, as you say, He has forgiven me of my sin!” He offered his hand in reconciliation. She had often spoken on love & forgiveness, but now all she could think about was vengeful & angry thoughts. If Jesus had died for him, too, and forgiven him, how could she ask for more? She tried to smile, but she couldn’t. She then silently prayed that Jesus help her forgive him, because she could not. She took his hand & her heart then leaped for a new love for this stranger. Is there someone you need to forgive? Find the grace to forgive in Jesus. Do you need to be forgiven? Repent. Tell a friend you thank God for them or write them a note or post it to social media. Show gratitude to someone of a different ethnic group than you. Remember that Christ died for everyone & that includes you. Trust Him & turn from your sins, so you can be forgiven & so you can begin to forgive others.