

Sermon Series: Overcome: Living Beyond Your Circumstances

To be used with: Session One: Overcome Betrayal

Sermon Title Possibilities:

How To Respond to Betrayal

Scripture: Philemon 1-19

Connection to Unit Theme: *Overcome: Living Beyond Your Circumstances* is a character study on the Old Testament hero, Joseph. In spite of periods of significant opposition and personal crisis, Joseph's faith led to international leadership and the preservation of God's people. He is an amazing example from Scripture of what it means to overcome difficult circumstances.

These are theme-based sermon outlines, which means they will deal with the same theme as the small group study, but will approach it from a different passage of Scripture. This will allow you as a pastor the chance to reinforce what learners encounter in small group Bible study and still set up your small group leaders for success.

Session 1 is called "Overcome Betrayal" and the Point is, "God is still at work, even when it isn't obvious."

There are a lot of thematic connections between the Old Testament story of Joseph and the New Testament story of Onesimus, the escaped slave for whom Paul advocates in the book of Philemon. Joseph was sold into slavery. Onesimus escaped from (and was being returned to) slavery. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers. Onesimus might have felt betrayed by Paul, who was basically returning him to Philemon's service. Philemon, for his part, certainly must have felt betrayed by Onesimus when Onesimus ran away. But for everyone involved, slavery was very much a secondary issue. Both Joseph and Onesimus understood the true freedom of a relationship with God.

Introduction:

Betrayal is a major part of our understanding of pop culture (Illustration possibilities):

- Sports – (i.e., a loved sports hero who signs a free agent contract with a rival team).
- Movies/TV/Books - (possibly from a popular series such as *The Hunger Games*).
- Career/Work – (such as an individual who uses others to climb to the top).

Our culture seems to have differing views on betrayal. In some settings, it seems to be rewarded or encouraged. In others, particularly personal relationships, our culture seems to look very unfavorably towards betrayal.

It is unlikely that any of us will go through life without experiencing personal betrayal. In most cases, it will come from someone very close to us. As followers of Christ, we must learn how to overcome the betrayal in life that we will inevitably face.

We find one story of how to overcome betrayal in the book of Philemon.

Philemon is a letter written by Paul to a man named Philemon on behalf of a man named Onesimus - who was a slave of Philemon's before having some kind of falling out with him, evidently running away, and seeking the counsel of Paul, who was believed to be in Rome under house arrest at this time. Philemon was the leader of a house church in the city of Colossae, and it is in fact thought that this letter was written and delivered in conjunction with the letter to the Colossians.

Before getting too far, it must be explained how different New Testament-era slavery was from the slavery that we are accustomed to hearing about in American history:

- Some slaves in this era were prisoners of war, but many others entered into slavery voluntarily in order to avoid or pay off debt. For those who were destitute, entering into slavery was a way to guarantee themselves a trade, a roof, and food.
- Slaves in this era were not recognizable by their race and some even owned their own slaves
- Most slaves did not consider their slavery to be permanent, and could purchase their way out of slavery after a certain amount of time.
- See the Old Testament story of Jacob to get an idea about how slavery was viewed differently than we view it today.

However, there were some similarities:

- It still was brutal. Slaves were considered property.
- Runaway slaves (such as Onesimus) were allowed by Roman law to be punished severely (even crucified) upon their capture and return.

Paul seeks to help both Philemon and Onesimus overcome the betrayal and bitterness of Onesimus' departure by encouraging them to restore the relationship and shatter the social status.

I. As followers of Christ, we are required to restore relationships and overcome betrayal. (Philemon 8-9)

In the NIV, the word “ought” appears all over the New Testament. In our culture, it is a word that means “we should do something, but it is not really necessary.” In our culture it carries a connotation of something being optional. But in the language of the New Testament, no such option exists. It is a word that means “obligation”.

It literally means, “to owe” or “to be indebted to.”

- It is used in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew, when Jesus says to pray, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Literally, “as we forgive those who are in obligation to us.”
- It is used in Romans 8 when Paul says we “ought to live not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.” He means we are obligated to.
- It is used in Matthew 18, where Jesus tells the parable of Unmerciful Servant - when the servant says, “Pay back what you owe me!” he is literally saying, “Pay me what you ought!”

So Paul is saying here that restoring relationships and shattering social statuses is required of those who would follow after Christ. Yet in spite of the fact that it would be required of Philemon AND Onesimus (and we can assume that Paul was sure that Onesimus knew the same thing), Paul decides, as he puts it, to make an appeal “on the basis of love”.

II. Our culture tells us not to forgive those who've broken our trust. The gospel commands us to welcome them back just as God does for us through Jesus (Philemon 9-14)

This section tells us what Paul is compelling Philemon to do: accept Onesimus back not merely as a slave but as a brother in Christ.

Illustration – tell a story of a time when God turned a negative in your life into a positive:

- A painful break-up that allowed you to find your spouse.
- A school or career roadblock that led to a more fulfilling career.

Paul acknowledges that the hand of God has been at work and put this in motion. Onesimus was in this situation and sought Paul because it was how God brought Onesimus to faith in Christ.

In the same way that God has turned negative things in your life into positive ones, he can use even things and people that hurt us to bring those people to him. Do we pray enough that this would be the case? As Jesus commands in Matthew 5:43, do we **“love (our) enemies and pray for those who persecute (us)”**? And this is where Paul breaks the social barrier - he asks Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a slave, but as a brother. Roman law allowed for runaway or disobedient slaves to be severely punished when they returned. Some owners would brand runaway slaves indicating that they were "fugitives," and others would have runaway slaves crucified. Philemon would have been expected by his society to treat Onesimus in such a way - in fact, no one would have batted an eye if he did. What would raise eyebrows would be for Philemon to treat Onesimus with gospel-inspired mercy, which is exactly what Paul asks him to do.

What Paul is advocating is a redefining of the relationship - a breakdown of the social barriers that, in their culture, are used to keep them separated.

In our culture, we are similarly expected to shun those who betray us. No one would be surprised if we did so - it is human nature. But what would shock the world would be if we responded to betrayal and hurt with gospel love and forgiveness.

Paul is teaching Philemon, Onesimus, and us (by extension) how to put faith into action. How to live like Christ. And Paul is doing it himself.

- v. 16 - Paul tells Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as a beloved brother. Christ says in Matthew 12 and whoever does the will of God is his brother and sister and mother. He also calls us to love each other as we love ourselves.
- v. 17 - Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus as you would me. Christ says in Matthew 25 that whatever you have done for one of these, you have done for me.
- v. 18 - Paul asks to take on the debt of Onesimus. The models Christ, who took on our debt, and resembles the story of the Good Samaritan in which the Samaritan not only cares for the injured man, but pays for him to have a room and several days' care as well.
- v. 19 - Paul appeals to the salvation of Philemon to urge for his forgiving of Onesimus. Christ tells the story of the Unmerciful Servant, who was unable to give even a drop of the mercy that was given to him.

Conclusion:

Overcoming betrayal is one of the most difficult things we will have to do. Our society says that we shouldn't do it. The gospel says that we must do it.

Questions for Congregation:

- Our faith requires us to forgive those who've hurt us. Do you?
- We should pray that God works in the heart of the person that betrayed us. Are you?
- Are you displaying a faith in action to the world by forgiving those who betray you?

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