

**The Heart Of A Spiritual Champion**

**Philemon**

February 6, 2005 • Sunday 11:00 AM • Dr. David McKinley

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And Lord this morning we make that our prayer, knowing that it is Christ and Christ alone who can work with power to cleanse us from sin, to set us free and to give us new life and a hope of eternity and Lord I pray that you would do what you alone can do in this place today for the glory and the honor of Jesus, in Whose name we pray. Amen. Amen.

You're well aware of the fact that today is a historic day of conquest in the NFL. [slight congregation laughter] At the close of this day Super Bowl 39 will crown the World Champions in football and of course there's been a tremendous amount of attention and effort and hype and everything else going on to put together the big Super Bowl celebration that's going to happen across America and really around the world today. It's an interesting a..., Super Bowl because it does mark American history. The New England Patriots come from the home of The Boston Tea Party. The Philadelphia Eagles come from the place of Independence Hall and so I guess you could really say it's the town that's known for it's beans against the town that's known for it's cheese steak sandwiches that's going to vie off in this a...a..., Super Bowl today. You're well aware of the fact also that a..., the Dallas Cowboys are not there. [slight congregation laughter] That did not prevent me from wearing blue and gray today and I say that to say that coach Bill Parcells needs our prayers. Heh! [more laughter] But that's another discussion. What I will say is that those who are participating in this Super Bowl today are there for many different reasons. In fact if you were to stop and to think for a moment about why the teams that are there are there you know that certainly it's because of a..., conditioning, it's because of training, it's because of discipline, it's because of talent, it's because of coaching a..., you can read a..., just a plectra of statistics between the offense and the defense and the special teams of these two teams that are contending for a world championship. But you know one of the items and elements that can easily be overlooked that must always be stated is that the teams that are there are there because of their heart. There's something inside of them, something beyond just what you can analyze on a piece of paper, but something that has made a difference to take them to the level of playing for a championship and I believe that the heart, the matter of the heart is one of the most important when it comes to the matter of winning, whether it's on the arena of the football field or in any area of life.

This past week I had the opportunity to sit down with several veteran NFL players. Each of these men had the opportunity to play in at least one Super Bowl, though not all of them experienced a championship. But I asked them the question, what does it take to have the heart of a champion? And I was so blessed by the things that they had to say and I wanted you to hear from these veteran NFL players something of what it takes to have the heart of a champion. Let's direct our attention to the screens for just a moment is you will.

VIDEO: NFL pictures and 3 NFL players comments.

Champions, men who had the heart of a champion. Each of them has been able to transfer that, not only from what they did as young men, but into the arena of life where they live today making a positive difference. Two of these men give the majority of their time to instructing and investing in the lives of children and making a difference with them. Lyle Blackwood on that video was actually in Afghanistan with our troops this morning, there encouraging them and each of them has discovered that the same principle that they learned while playing football had been able to shape their hearts in order to help them to be able to win in life and you know I believe that winning in life is something that everyone in this building desires today. I believe that every person who is here, whether or not you've ever put on the pads or have ever played a game of football in your life, every single person here has a desire to win. Now, obviously when we look back across the course of Super Bowl history there are some figures and faces that stand out and above all the rest and that's not only true as we look at the history of a sport that we love, it's true when we take and open our Bibles and see something of some spiritual champions that are mentioned and that are listed there. Most of you are well a..., acquainted with Hebrews chapter 11, sort of the hall of fame, the hall of faith of men and women who lived by faith to please God. But if there's one figure in the New Testament who I believe exhibits the heart of a spiritual champion it is the Apostle Paul. Paul played in...in the game of life as though he were playing for a Super Bowl. He wanted to win for God and to make a positive difference and an impact in his generation and God used him in an incredible way and I believe that there are some insights from the heart of Paul that we can examine together today, that will help each of us to be able to go forth on this Super Bowl Sunday into a new arena of life, living to make a difference for Christ. I wanna invite you to take your Bible and open it with me to a rather small and obscure letter written by Paul, it is the book of Philemon. The book of Philemon, you may have a little bit of trouble finding it. If you get to the book of Hebrews you've gone too far. If you're in the 5 T's, Thessalonians, Timothy or Titus you're going to find that it's the book just after those and right at Hebrews. A small, as though it were, New Testament e-mail; one page, 25 verses, a simple statement of Paul's life, ministry and faith and I must be honest and tell you that I'm going to preach my entire sermon series on the book of Philemon this morning. I have one message. Our pastor's gonna to begin a wonderful new series in the book of Philippians and that's another book written by Paul and expresses something of his attitude and of his demeanor in life. But this is such a personal letter and such a

powerful letter that I want you to see it and I want you to understand from this little New Testament e-mail today, something about what it takes to have *The Heart Of A Spiritual Champion*. Now let me just walk us through some highlights in the book of Philemon. The book of Philemon opens with Paul expressing **A PRAYER FOR A BROTHER**. He's praying for someone that he loves, in fact it's the man whose name is on the letter, Philemon and let's begin reading in verse 4, Paul said:

*<sup>4</sup>I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, <sup>5</sup>hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, <sup>6</sup>that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup>For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.*

Do you hear the affection? Do you hear the appreciation in Paul's voice? He's saying as I think of you today Philemon, I think of you in a way that brings encouragement and refreshment, it's just like a mint. You know have you ever had too much coffee in the morning and needed some mid-morning refreshment? Nothing like putting that mint in your mouth, well, Paul said when I think of you it's like a refreshment to my heart and to everyone who knows you and so Paul introduces this letter with a prayer for a brother... **< turn tape >** ...ly the letter changes in its direction and its tone. It's not simply a letter of appreciation, suddenly we see Paul in the highlight of this letter making **A PLEA FOR A SLAVE**, a plea for a slave. If you'll look down with me now and we'll begin reading in just a moment a..., in verse 10 the backdrop of this letter is that a..., Rome was absolutely overwhelmed with the impact of slavery. It was a dark chapter in history, even as it was in our own history at one time in America. But here were a abundance of slaves that historians indicate there could have been millions of slaves, but one of those slaves, a man by the name of Onesimus decided to make a break from his life of slavery and to come to Rome and to try to just move into the masses in Rome. He got there, he was on his own, but somehow in the process he ended up meeting Paul. We don't know whether or not Onesimus actually ended up with Paul. Paul was in prison. Paul was in jail. This letter was written from a jail and from bondage in his life. It's amazing to think that a slave, a man who was trying to get out of bondage and limitations would go and would listen to a man like Paul. So whether he was in prison or simply met him there, what we know happened is that there was an encounter that changed this slave's life. Let's read it beginning in verse 10, he said:

*<sup>10</sup>I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, <sup>11</sup>who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me <sup>12</sup>and I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,*

Do you see what's happening here? In the providence of God Onesimus, this runaway slave ends up meeting Paul this prisoner and he...he meets him and he hears his message, a message about forgiveness and freedom in Jesus Christ and something that was missing in Onesimus' life connected with his

heart and Paul led him to Christ and it changed Onesimus' life and as it could have only been in the providence of God, not only did God bring Onesimus to Paul that he might be saved, but Onesimus came to meet Paul and Paul knew the man who owned him and who had the bond on his slavery. It was Philemon. Now, there's a lot we don't know about Philemon. We don't know when this happened, whether or not he had released slaves at this point, but what we do know is that Paul began to use that relationship that he had with Philemon and with Onesimus to create an incredible sense of restitution and of resolution and so what we see not in verse 15 is Paul writing and expressing that, he said:

<sup>15</sup>*For perhaps he...*

The is Onesimus.

*...departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever,*

But listen to this!

<sup>16</sup>*no longer as a slave but...a brother beloved and especially ~~to~~ye...to me but now how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

Paul said, listen Philemon, God has done something incredible. God has changed Onesimus' life and if you need evidence of that note the fact that Onesimus is gonna take this little letter back to his former slave owner Philemon. Now in that day the slaves were like cattle, they were like common property. He could have simply been put to death, but you see he had confidence of what God had done in his life and he was willing to go back and to express the change that Christ had brought in him.

Did you read this week or hear this week in Colorado about a..., the letter that the principle of The Eagle Valley High School received? His name is Mark Strackbein and Mark said that he got a letter that said:

*"I am a grandmother of 5, but I stole the answers to a Shakespeare test in tall of 1957."*

Heh, heh. She went on to say:

*"I know it makes no difference now after 47 years, except maybe this will keep some student from cheating and help them to be honest. Conscience never lets you forget! There is forgiveness from God and I have that, but I still felt that I needed to confess to the school."*

Heh! A grandmother who wrote and said hey, I have gotten away with this all these years, but you know what? I wanna make it right. Well, in much the same way, though Onesimus had gotten away because he met Christ it changed him and he wanted to be right. But, even more than that Paul wanted Philemon to be right and from a jail cell he started a cultural revolution. He said, I want you no longer to see this man as a slave, he's

now a brother and you've gotta change and we've gotta change because in Christ we've all been changed by the power of the gospel. See that's what happened in this little letter. Well, then we come to the final part of the letter and that is a plan for a visit. **A PLAN FOR A VISIT**, let's look down here in verse 20, Paul says:

Yes, brother, let my...me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I am going to be granted to you.

Paul said, I'm in prison, I'm writing you this letter, I have every confidence in the world that you're gonna do exactly what I've asked you to do about Onesimus and about this relationship, but he said, by the way I want you to prepare a room, cause I'm lookin forward to a day that I'm gonna get out and I'm gonna come be with both of you guys. Now we don't know whether or not Paul had any hope of gettin out of prison. He was chained, he was enslaved himself, but you see here is the heart of this man, the heart of this man toward God, the heart of this man toward others, the heart of this man in some hard life circumstances and what you see in this very personal and powerful little New Testament e-mail is a word of encouragement to you today. **HOW CAN YOU AND HOW CAN I HAVE The Heart Of A Spiritual Champion?** Well I want to suggest to you today 3 basic things that are essential if you're going to have *The Heart Of A Spiritual Champion*. You see the issue of your heart is more important than anything else in your life. In the book of Proverbs chapter 4 in verse 23 the Scripture says:

*Watch over your heart with all diligence, For out of the heart glow the issues of life.*

And 3 times in this little letter Paul mentions the heart and the condition of the heart and what we are seeing is something about his heart. So what needs to happen in my heart and in your heart if we are going to be spiritual champions? Well...

**#1 We must GUARD OUR HEARTS WITH GRATITUDE.** Guard your heart with gratitude. Have you noticed how easy it is to be sour in life? Have you noticed how many people, even people of means and of...and people of privilege, how many times those people are unhappy and disgruntled and a..., critical in life. It's amazing how just the ways of life, the fact that life is ever changing and life is beyond our control and...and life brings things that we don't anticipate and things we wouldn't choose, how easy it is to become a person whose whole life is just filled with agitation, disappointment, discouragement and disillusionment. Paul certainly could have been that way. He wasn't preaching. He wasn't traveling. He was in prison and prison wasn't a nice place to stay, prison was ugly, prison was dirty, prison was defiled, prison was cold and Paul was in bonds, but how did he start his letter?

*I thank my God,...*

Paul opens his heart and what we immediately hear is a heart that is overflowing with gratitude to God. Now, Paul, as I mentioned he had repeated 6 times that he was in this prison situation, but even though his life experience and life circumstance was not desirable, Paul did not let that overshadow the fact that his faith and his confidence was in the Lord and therefore he lived looking to God and expressing gratitude to God even for his imprisonment. Look at what he said in verse 1:

*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus,...*

You see he even saw his imprisonment as a privilege, because he knew that God was working through his imprisonment. In 1774 William Cowper wrote these words:

*God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.  
He plants His footstep in the sea and He rides upon the storm.  
You fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds you so much dread  
Are big with mercy and shall break with blessings on your head.  
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace.  
Behind a crowning providence He hides a smiling face.  
Blind unbelief is sure to ere and scan His work in vain.  
God is it's own interpreter and He will make it plain.*

Are you struggling with some things right now in life that are causing you to struggle with your attitude? Are you right now at a place where it would be easy for you to express ingratitude and to just live day after day and to rehearse the misery of the moment? I'm amazed at how many people are living in misery and the reason that so many times we are in misery is not because we have something that no one else has ever experienced around us or before us, it's because we've lost sight of the fact that it is the guarding of the gratitude of the heart that makes the heart of a champion. Paul later wrote these words in 1 Thessalonians 5, in verse 18:

*in everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

In everything, he didn't say for everything. I'm not thankful for everything that happens, but in everything I can trust in the providence of God and here's what Paul had learned. He had learned that his gratitude in life would be based on the consistency of God's character and not his changing circumstances. God is good and because God is good I can have a grateful heart. God is good and even when I'm going through a hard time I can pause and say thank you Lord and I praise you Lord. God is good and even when my finances are depleted and I'm running low I'm still going to give because giving is an expression of gratitude in my heart to God and in every arena of life I'm going to guard the condition of gratitude in my heart because God is good and He is worthy to be praised. What a picture of a spiritual champion. A man who could have been down, a man who was

playing in pain, but he played through that pain because he had a heart that was grounded in gratitude to God. You really could have called this little letter, confessions of a happy prisoner. Heh! Because here was a man who was guarding the gratitude of his life. There was a second thing that make up a heart of Paul and that was not only that he expressed to us and that you and I must guard the gratitude of our hearts but...

**Secondly:** You must **FREE YOUR HEART WITH FORGIVENESS**. Free your heart with forgiveness. One of the reasons that so many people are living in slavery and bondage in life is because they've never been forgiven and they've never forgiven. Paul, while in prison met a man who bore the brand of a slave; he was a man who felt that his life would never amount to anything and would never matter. He was a man who had rebelled, he was a man who had run away. He was a man who needed to be set free. But the only way that any person can ever be free is to first and foremost experience forgiveness in their life and nothing is more powerful than the appeal that Paul made to his friend Philemon, who received Onesimus, this slave, as a brother in Christ. It was that relationship with Christ that had changed him and Onesimus, by receiving Christ, had been set free. The Bible says if the Son shall make you free, you are free in deed and the greatest moment of freedom that ever comes in life is the moment that you hear the word of God, the testimony of Jesus Christ, that you turn from sin and put your faith and trust in Christ and then you experience freedom in your life and that freedom gave Onesimus a complete new focus and power as to how he would live his life in the days to come.

In the last few days we've seen some incredible pictures of freedom. You know our president has said he believes that God has put in every person's heart a desire to be free and last week following the Iraqi elections I saw one photograph that sort of captured the whole issue for me. I brought that photograph today because it's a picture of an Iraqi woman who having voted, bearing the stain, the purple or blue stain on her finger indicating that she had exercised her right to vote and frankly had been marked with a desire for freedom that could have put her in danger. But there behind that veiled face is a tear and a fingerprint of freedom and the holding of a flag that says I have a hope for a new future. I want you to know that I believe that what we said and have seen in the life of the people of Iraq is indeed the great hunger of the hearts of people everywhere and not just for what democracy can bring, but for the freedom of a heart and the freedom of the conscience and the only freedom that I can ever have and ultimately receive is the freedom that comes from Christ. The Bible says in the book of Romans chapter 8 and verse 1:

*Therefore there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*

You see the greatest freedom that can ever happen life is when a man, a woman, a boy or a girl prays and receives Christ in their life and when that happens you are set free. Paul said Onesimus is free in Christ and so Philemon he needs to be set free with you. I want you to see how strongly Paul expressed this down in verse 18, actually let's begin back up in

verse 17:

*If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.*

Paul said now if you count me as a partner in the gospel of Christ Philemon, I want you to receive Onesimus just like you would receive me. But here's the verse, verse 18:

*But if he has wronged you or owes you anything,...*

See the last part of that phrase?

*...put it on my account.*

Literally he says Philemon, charge it! Charge it to me, because whatever he may owe you God has given him in grace and I have been an instrument of God's grace in your life. Did you know that Paul had led Philemon to Christ also? And because Paul has been a spiritual father to Philemon, just as he was to Onesimus when he said to him, I want you to put that on my account. He said whatever the stain, whatever the problem I want you to take that debt and give it to me and I want you to take the credit of God's grace extended to you through my life and I want you to make it right. You see in this moment we see the perfect picture of what salvation is. Salvation is me understanding that I have a debt of sin, that I cannot make satisfaction for of my own effort and my own means, but that God has provided satisfaction for me in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ the Son of God came and died on a cross, He was buried and He rose on the third day that He might pay my sin and cover my debt. Here's what the Bible says, the Bible says that:

*God made Him who know no sin to become sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.*

2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 21, it is the great transaction of the cross. It is the power of Christ given to me, allowing me to be forgiven, me to be set free because it's all charged to the account of Jesus Christ. I hope today that you have experienced that transaction in your life, that you've been set free from sin by knowing that Christ will credit you His righteousness if you will be willing to confess and to turn from your sins and to put your faith and your trust in Him. All of us need that experience, we need to be forgiven and when you are forgiven your heart is set free. But it's not enough just to have personal freedom in your life you must also extend that freedom to others, that forgiveness to others. You see there are people in this room today who live in American but they're not free. They live in the land of the free but they're in bondage. Some are in bondage to alcohol and to sexual sins, others are in bondage to bitterness and to anger and to disillusionment in life, still others are in bondage to materialism and possessions and they need to experience the forgiveness of God that they need be...may be set free, but they also need to for...to experience the extension of forgiveness to others that they heart be...may be made clean.



I have a simple little step that I want to share with you that I want you to consider this morning as it relates to **FREEDOM OF YOUR HEART THROUGH FORGIVENESS**. First you need to **EXPERIENCE IT**, but then you must **EXPRESS IT**. You see Paul could have been embittered in prison, Onesimus could have been rebellious and said I'm never going back, Philemon could have said there's no way! But you see there was something that happened in their hearts with Christ that changed the way they treated one another and I believe that that's one of the secrets to being a champion spiritually in your life is that you have to be set free from bitterness through forgiveness. What is this step?

**#1 BROKENNESS INVITES BITTERNESS** in my life. Whenever I'm broken, whenever life a..., throws me a curve ball, whenever I have an injury or a breakdown in a relationship, any form of brokenness, hurt and injury invites bitterness into my life and it's easy to become an embittered person. You can't be neutral when you hurt and brokenness invites bitterness. But here's the other truth...

**#2 BITTERNESS, WHEN IT'S HARBORED IN YOUR HEART, INCREASES YOUR BROKENNESS**. You see you're caught in a cycle of brokenness. Rather than being able to be set free you're now living, rehearsing your brokenness and your bitterness and your brokenness and your bitterness and many people are going through life today and they are living encumbered to the sin and to the bondage of bitterness in their heart because someone has done them wrong. But the Scripture teaches us that as followers of Christ that...

**#3 BITTERNESS DEMANDS FORGIVENESS**. If I've been forgiven then I must set others free in my life, not by holding IOU's but by releasing them and by understanding the importance of a spirit of forgiveness just as we see expressed here between Paul and Onesimus and Philemon and here's the beauty of it all, it's that...

**#4 FORGIVENESS MENDS MY BROKENNESS**. When I'm broken, when forgiveness is needed in my life and when it is extended whether I'm able to change the circumstances or simply to release the person who has injured me in those circumstances it is forgiveness that mends my brokenness and that's exactly what happens between Paul and Onesimus and Philemon. They were set free through the power of forgiveness and if you wanna have *The Heart Of A Spiritual Champion*, you must first guard your heart through gratitude but you must, you must, you must free your heart through forgiveness. There's one final thing that I want you to see today that's a part of *The Heart Of A Spiritual Champion* and that is what we read in those closing verses down in verse 21 and 22 and what are those verses? Well, I wanna read them to you again but this time from the New American Standard Version, Paul says:

<sup>21</sup>Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I now know that you will do even more than I say. <sup>22</sup>And at the same time also prepare for me lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.

What's the 3<sup>rd</sup> secret of the heart of a champion? It is to heal your heart with hope. **HEAL YOUR HEART WITH HOPE.** Life hurts, but hope heals. Paul could have even been despondent, not only because of the fact that he was a..., in prison, but because he was having to send his friend Onesimus back to Philemon. He was gonna be left, as though it were, a..., by himself again. But instead, what we see is Paul sending him back and Paul is sending him back with the hope that one day he's gonna be out of prison and he's gonna come see his friends and his brothers Onesimus and Philemon and all the others that are there. You see when life hurts you need hope and one of the things that I love here in the life of Paul is that Paul has not lost heart and he has not lost hope. Did you know that our word courage actually comes from a French word that means heart, *heh*, that may sound a little interesting in the political climate of today that we would call the French the people of the heart and of courage but it does come from that word. And do you know that when I am discouraged I am losing heart? You heard everyone of those men say in that video earlier that one of the secrets they learned was having to persevere, having to hold on to hope in life. But how much more is that true in the context of this world that brings such injury and pain day after day after day? How vital it is that we have a hope. The Bible says that we have a confident expectation in Christ and therefore it is that hope that gives us strength and gives us the ability and gives us heart to go forward. I saw hope reborn across America on Wednesday night during the State Of The Union Address. I don't know about you but I was so proud of our president and what he had to say and how he challenged our nation and what he did in that moment and we need to pray that God will give him wisdom and strength and clarity to move forward with the things that he has discussed. But I want you to know that one of the most incredible moments was when our president look into the gallery and there he recognized the mother of a slain marine, Sgt. Byron Norwood, and when his mother and father stood in that moment the tears began to flow as she stood there as a representation of the families who have experienced the hurt and the loss and the sacrifice of war and of course the entire arena of people rose to applaud and to commend her in that moment, but something that no one could have ever imagined or ever written took place, because right in front of the mother of Sgt. Norwood was a young Iraqi woman who just days earlier had exercised her right for the first time ever to vote in her home town of Baghdad, 11 years earlier her father had been assassinated by Saddam Hussein and as she came there that night she had been recognized earlier and stood and held up the finger stained with the right of exercise of voting and freedom and suddenly these two women turned and their eyes connected and when they did; well here's the moment I'll show it to you on the screen. Suddenly there was a meltdown in...among the entire Congress and every powerful person in the world who was there couldn't help but shed tears to say that is a rebirth of hope, that is an expression of gratitude, that is a symbol of forgiveness and of freedom and it all came together in that moment as together we observed what hope we could share for a future that would make a difference in our world and in the history to come.

Ladies and gentlemen 2000 years ago Christ did something for us through

His sacrifice, to open the ability for us to have a change of heart that would change us from sin and bondage to freedom, that we could experience forgiveness, that we could live with gratitude, that we could express hope and today I want you to know that gratitude, that hope and that forgiveness in your life.