

## INSPIRED TEXT MESSAGES – Part 1

### TEXT MESSAGE FROM PAUL

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- Preaching passage: Philemon
- Subject: What the text message was that the apostle Paul sent to Philemon
- Complement: show grace and love to Onesimus just as Jesus Christ has shown grace to you.
- Exegetical idea: The apostle Paul appealed to Philemon to show grace to his run away slave Onesimus just as Jesus Christ had shown grace to him.
- Preaching idea: **Since you have received grace from Jesus Christ, show grace to those around you!**
- Purpose: To encourage my hearers accept the grace that Jesus has for you and then show grace to those around you.

When I got my new Blackberry, I decided to try my hand as a text messenger. I thought it was a novel idea to send a short message from one cell phone to another, that is until I found out that Verizon was charging me about 30 cents per message. Fortunately the Hardesty family is on a flat-rate plan. Reina Hardesty, a 13 year-old girl from California, just set a record by sending 14, 528 text messages in one month! Her dad's phone bill was 440 pages long. That's about one message every two minutes that she was awake! She has already broken her record with over 18,000 text messages in one month—that's one text message every two minutes including the hours that she is asleep!

Modern text messaging or SMS, hasn't been around for that many years. It started in the early 90s. Originally, text messages were 160 characters or less,

including spaces. Today, I don't think that anyone is counting. Text messaging is a global phenomenon and growing exponentially every year. Verizon estimated that 144 billion text messages were sent by its customers in 2008.

The modern text-messaging craze gave us the idea for our new sermon series—Inspired Text Messages. We are going to examine some of the short text messages contained in the New Testament that are often overlooked: one from Paul, one from John, one from Jude, one from James, and one from Peter. We're going to ask three questions as we study each of these five text messages: Who? What? and So What? We'll look at the setting, discover the identity of the sender and the receiver—that's the who; we'll look at the content of the inspired text message—that's the what; and then we'll consider the significance of these text messages for our lives today—that's the So What?

There are more text messages, short letters, in the New Testament from the apostle Paul than any other author—one to Titus, two to Timothy, two to the Christians in Thessalonica, and so on. We have chosen to begin our series on Inspired Text Messages with a study of Paul's text message to Philemon. Hopefully you received a copy of Paul's text message when you came to church today. It's only 15 sentences long.

Let's start with the first 2 verses, as we ask our first question—Who? Who is the sender of this text message and who is the recipient? "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy *our* brother, To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer,

to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.”

The author of the text message is well known to most of us. Paul, once Saul of Tarsus, an enemy of Jesus and all who followed Him, but now Paul the apostle, a devoted follower of Jesus. The description that Paul gives of himself helps us to date this text message. How does Paul describe himself? Not “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ,” which is how he often begins his letters, but “Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus. “This text message is one of the prison epistles, written during Paul’s imprisonment in Rome, perhaps around 61 AD.

As we look to find the recipient or recipients of this text message we notice that there are 3 names mentioned in the opening sentences—Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. It’s clear as we read this text message that Philemon is the primary recipient, which has led some Bible scholars to suggest that “our sister Apphia”, or “our beloved Apphia”, as it reads in some manuscripts, was actually Philemon’s wife. It might also be logical to conclude that Archippus is part of the Philemon family as well, perhaps their son. The Philemon family lived in Colossae, and Archippus is mentioned in Paul’s text message to the church in Colossae as one of the leaders of that Christian community. Notice at the end of verse 2 that a Christian church in Colossae meets in Philemon’s house.

Unlike today, this text message couldn’t be delivered to Philemon’s cell phone! There wasn’t even snail mail in the first century, at least not the kind of sophisticated postal service that we are accustomed to today. Any text message had

to be delivered by hand. The author, in this case the apostle Paul, either had to deliver the text message himself, or it had to be delivered by a servant or emissary. It appears that this text message to the Philemon family was delivered by a man named Onesimus. Most of us have never heard of Onesimus, but the Philemon family knew him well. We'll learn more about Onesimus and the rest of the story as we continue our study of Paul's inspired text message to the Philemon family.

Onesimus didn't make the trip from Rome to Colossae by himself. That was a journey that would take several months. It was safer if you had a travel companion. Onesimus travelled with a brother in Christ named Tychicus who was delivering a longer text message from Paul to all of the Christians in Colossae. Onesimus and Tychicus had both spent time with Paul in Rome and they travelled together back to Colossae, each delivering a text message from Paul. Someone might be thinking, "That's strange. Why didn't Paul just send two text messages with Tychicus? We'll find the answer to that question as we continue our study.

Well, we've answered our first question—Who? We've learned a little about the setting: a text message from Paul to the Philemon family in Colossae and the church in their home, hand delivered by a man named Onesimus. Now let's turn our attention to our second question—What? That is the text message all about? Paul continues in verses 3-8: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment

of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.”

This text message to the Philemon family begins with some very affirming and encouraging words, doesn't it? And Paul means every word he has written. But Paul also knows that Philemon and his family are facing a major challenge even as they are reading the first part of this text message because they have just reconnected with the person who delivered the text message—Onesimus!

Why are they facing such a challenge? Let's continue reading with verses 7-16. “Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

Did you figure out who Onesimus was? He was Philemon's runaway slave! The text message doesn't tell us how long it had been since Onesimus ran away from

his master's house in Colossae, but it was long enough to make it to Rome, eventually connect with Paul, come to faith in Christ, and agree to return with an inspired text message from Paul. You might infer from verse 18 that Onesimus not only ran away from his master's house, but he may have also taken some of the Philemon family's possessions when he left! Paul says to Philemon, "if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account."

How do you think Philemon is feeling as he reads Paul's text message? What thoughts are racing through his mind? The punishment for being a runaway slave, according to Roman law, was death. And Onesimus not only ran away; he took some of the family possessions with him! But Paul is appealing to Philemon to not only waive the death penalty, but to accept Onesimus as a beloved brother. Doesn't that sound outrageous? It certainly doesn't sound fair. No wonder Paul started out with some encouraging words! In fact, that was standard Greek and Roman rhetoric. Build rapport, persuade, and then move the heart! Paul has some persuading to do!

What is Paul's rationale for Philemon to receive his runaway slave as a brother? Let's continue reading verses 17-25. "If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. But if he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention that you owe me even your own self besides."

Paul brought Philemon the good news about Jesus Christ and Paul is saying, "We have all found a new life in Jesus Christ. We are all brothers in Christ Jesus! Since we have all been shown amazing grace by God, let's show grace to each other!

Verse 20: “Yes, brother, let 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.” In other words, when you think about how much grace God has shown to you, you show grace in abundance to your runaway slave Onesimus! “But meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.” Did Paul really think he would be able to visit Philemon again? I don’t know, but it certainly helped Philemon to focus on what Paul was saying. After all, Paul might stop by to check up on him!

It must not have been an easy decision for Philemon to accept Onesimus back. He had to give up the right to see justice measured out. He even had to give up the right to ever get his slave back! But when we think about how much grace God has shown to us, we must show grace to one another!

Paul closes his text message with some greetings: “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”

Did you notice that Mark was with Paul there in Rome? There was a time when Paul didn’t show much grace to Mark. Paul and Barnabas had taken John Mark with them on their first missionary journey, but Mark got homesick by the time they got to Perga in Pamphylia and he headed back to Jerusalem. When it was time for their second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance. We find the story in Acts 15:37-40a. “.....”

Later the apostle Paul would regret that graceless behavior. After all, didn't the Lord Jesus give Saul a second chance? Didn't God show grace to Him? When Saul was struck down on the Damascus Road in his encounter with the Risen Christ, I'm sure that Saul thought he was a dead man, but Jesus showed grace to him. Jesus gave him another chance.

Paul has learned his lesson and he shares this truth in his inspired text message to Philemon: Since God has shown such grace to each one of us, let us show grace to each other!

I saw a beautiful example of showing grace during my recent meetings in Vancouver, WA. A couple planned to give their testimony on Friday evening. The husband had developed an inappropriate relationship with another woman and eventually left his wife with two children in their early teens. His wife decided to hold on to Jesus and claim His promises for new life. She was led to the story of The couple was separated for almost two years but now they have reunited! On Friday evening, the husband renewed his commitment to Christ through baptism with his wife standing by his side. While still in the baptistery, they renewed their marriage vows! What a snapshot of grace! But someone might say, "That's not fair! That scoundrel left his wife. He mistreated her." You're right. He didn't deserve such grace and neither do any of us. But God has shown such grace to us—we ought to show grace to each other.

You may not face a crisis of that magnitude this week, but someone may test your limits. A family member may be having a bad day, and human reasoning might

suggest that you “let them have it” but pause for a moment and remember that God has shown grace to you—show grace to those around you. Someone may cut you off in traffic on the way to work or on the way to the store and you may have an instant rise in blood pressure! But before you unleash a tirade of hostility remember that God has shown grace to you—show grace to those around you. Someone at work may be storming around like a bear with a sore foot. Her behavior may have more to do with her own family problems than anything you’ve done. Before you cut her off at the knees either verbally or silently in your head remember that God has shown grace to you—show grace to those around you.

That’s a take away lesson from Paul’s inspired text message to the Philemon family! God has shown grace to you—show grace to those around you.