

Charge It

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



Published and distributed by
Thru the Bible Radio Network
P.O. Box 7100
Pasadena, California 91109-7100
(800) 65-BIBLE
www.ttb.org

Scripture references are from the *New Scofield Reference Bible*.
(This message is also included in the hardback book, *Feasting on the Word*,
Copyright 1992 by Thru the Bible Radio.)

The credit card has become the symbol of American business. It is the fraternity pin of the average American. It is the passport to plenty for a great many today. Anything can be bought with a credit card, from a gallon of gas to a ten gallon hat, from a sandwich to a chain of motels, from a night's lodging to a subdivision in Southern California.

There is a restaurant in Texas that displays insignias of all the different credit card organizations with the caption: *We Accept All These* and down underneath they add *We Take Cash Also*. When a purchase is made in any department store in the United States today, the classic cliché of the salesperson is "charge or cash?" and there's a slight look of disappointment if it's cash. You're immediately under suspicion when you're carrying that stuff around.

It may come to you as a bit of a shock to learn that Paul the apostle had a credit card even in his day – so they're not so new after all. In his letter to Philemon, we read:

If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee anything, put that on mine account [just use my credit card, if you don't mind]. ***I, Paul, have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it; albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*** (Philemon 18, 19)

So Paul the apostle could write to Philemon and say in effect, "Put it on my account, I'm signing now to put it on my credit card so you will know that I intend to pay this."

Behind that statement, of course, is a story. Back of the little missal of Philemon is a missionary. Back of this epistle is the apostle. Back of his promise is a person who will pay. Back of the charge is collateral, and back of the communication is a confidence that brings comfort to the heart.

I want us to see the background of this little epistle, for it tells its own story. Paul went to Ephesus on his third missionary journey. He spent two whole years there, and we are told in Acts 19:9, 10 that the gospel sounded out from the school of Tyrannus during that period and by that method. It was a sounding board or, in a sense, a broadcasting station so that all who lived in that entire area "heard the word of the Lord." As a result, seven churches of Asia Minor came into existence. These are the seven churches to which our Lord directed the letters that we read in the first part of the book of Revelation.

Also there were other churches credited to Paul that he had never visited. People had come to Ephesus where he was preaching, heard the gospel, were converted, went back to their communities, and organized another local church. Such was the church of Colosse. Paul never visited it, as far as we know, although he is the founder of that church.

Now in the church of Colosse there was a very prominent man who was also a very rich man. His name was Philemon. Paul had led him to the Lord: "I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it; albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides" (Philemon 19). Now when this man was led to the Lord by Paul; as it generally happens when you are the instrument of leading someone to the Lord, Philemon felt indebted to him. Folk like that are generally the ones who are the most generous, by the way, and I think that was true of Philemon. After he came to know Christ, he probably came privately to the apostle Paul and said, "Paul, if you ever have need of anything or if ever I can do anything for you, do not hesitate to call on me. You are the means of my new birth. You are God's instrument, and I am perfectly willing to do anything for you that is at all possible for me to do."

Now Paul in this epistle is calling upon Philemon to do something, and this is what it was. This man, Philemon, owned slaves, as practically every man of means in the Roman Empire did. Before Philemon was converted (I have reason to believe it took place before) one of his slaves

ran away. It was very common in that day, especially if a slave had been mistreated, although many times that was not the case, and we have no reason to believe that this slave had been mistreated.

The name of this slave was Onesimus, and the very interesting thing is that his name means “profitable” which leads us to judge that he had been profitable to Philemon. Many slaves in that day were made custodians of the children of the owner and often custodians of all his estate. Many of them actually acted as a fiscal agent so they could sign for the owner. The truth of the matter is that some owners were unable to sign their own names, whereas their slaves were educated. So this man Onesimus or “Profitable” evidently had been very profitable, and as a result he must have been put in charge and had a great deal under his supervision. He was a trusted slave and, of course, this opened up an avenue for him to escape. He could take advantage of it by reaching into the till of his owner and taking out whatever he needed for travel in that day.

Saying all of this reveals the open sore of the Roman Empire, that cancerous growth that finally sapped the strength of this mighty empire and brought it toppling down to the ground. The historian Gibbon says that one half of the 120 millions of people who populated the Roman Empire (60 millions of those people) were slaves. The slave was certainly not considered very valuable. One family in Rome had a retinue of 20 thousand slaves. Slave owners in that day were incredibly brutal. They had no regard for the lives of those under them. The plight of the slaves in the Roman Empire was hopeless. There was no place for them to flee. To go beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire was the most dangerous thing for them to attempt, for the minute they crossed over, they would be picked up. The only way that they could possibly affect a successful escape was to go to some great metropolis and drown themselves in the great sea of the multitudes and mobs that were there. This, of course, made Rome the type of city that had to entertain the population with circuses and give them free food because many of those people were actually escaped slaves. No one could put his finger on them. It would be difficult, indeed, to identify any one of them.

Now the slave, because of his hopeless condition and the way he was treated, became morally corrupt and, in turn, he corrupted the youth of Rome. You see, the slaves were responsible for the instruction of the youth of Rome. The gross immorality that came into the Roman Empire came by way of the slaves teaching it to their young charges. Juvenal, the Roman writer, tells of a woman in Rome who had a slave killed just to see him die. The Emperor Augustus once interfered with a citizen who was about to throw a slave into a pool of voracious lamprey eels. Although Augustus intervened, don’t think that he loved slaves, because the same Augustus Caesar under whose reign the Lord Jesus was born had a slave executed for the crime of killing a pet pigeon and a favorite quail of his. The slave had accidentally killed them, and as a result he was crucified – even as the Lord Jesus was. These instances are mere samples of the sadism that swept over the Roman Empire.

Virgil, another Roman writer, says there were three classes of implements, of chattels, in the Roman Empire. You divide them like this, vocal, semi-vocal, and dumb. The vocal were slaves, semi-vocals were animals, and the dumb were plows, chariots, etc. that they had around the place. When a slave stole (and many of them did – most were thieves) and was caught, he would be branded on his forehead with the letters CH, the Latin *Ceva Hurm*, meaning “beware the thief,” and I’m sure that would have applied to Onesimus. He would have carried that mark to his dying day. A runaway slave had no rights whatsoever before Roman justice. A master could

take him and do with him what he pleased. Onesimus was a runaway slave. He belonged to Philemon.

Onesimus finally made it to Rome. He wasn't too far from the border, but he didn't try for it. He knew his only hope was to get into some great metropolis, and we have every reason to believe that he hopped from Ephesus, then probably to Corinth and from there to Rome. There he buried himself in that great metropolis with the great population around him, thinking he would never be discovered – and the chances are he never would have been discovered.

But I can imagine one day Onesimus walking down the street. I do not think he is as happy with the freedom he has as he thought he would be. He certainly now has difficulty finding food – before, his master fed him. He has difficulty now of getting a place to sleep. Before, his master had that responsibility. So he finds that there was a freedom in slavery, and there is also a slavery in freedom. This man probably is not as happy as he could be. He's looking for entertainment, for Rome at this time certainly majored in entertainment, which explains the great Colosseum and all the entertainment that went on there. It was the emperor's way of keeping the mob satisfied in order that they might not take to the streets and riot.

In that mob was Onesimus. Walking down the street he saw a little group, a knot of people gathered around some man. He was curious. He elbowed his way into the crowd and had his first glimpse of Paul the apostle, chained to a Roman soldier. In fact, he was chained to a soldier who belonged to the Praetorian Guard, which meant Paul was a special prisoner. He had appealed to Rome, but now he had freedom until his trial came up – that is, the freedom that the end of a chain would give to him – for he was chained to the soldier in his own rented quarters.

Paul was doing what he always did. God said when He first called Paul that He intended for him to appear before kings, and this he was going to do, and he already had. God said that he was to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and he is – there he is preaching on the streets of Rome and the crowd is around him.

Onesimus works his way up into the crowd and he listens. He hears this man talking about a liberty that is in Christ, a liberty that any slave would want and the kind of liberty that he had not found by running away, always running. But this man who is chained to a soldier is *free*, and he's found out that if the Son makes you free you're free indeed regardless of where you are or who you are. And this man, Paul the apostle, is preaching about the crucifixion of Christ. He's preaching about His resurrection. He's telling men and women to believe on Him, and some do.

Onesimus lingers after the others leave. He says, "I'd like to talk with you." And Paul leads this man Onesimus to the Lord. Paul tells us this in verse 10: "I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds." While he's chained to that Roman soldier, Paul leads this runaway slave to the Lord.

One day Onesimus came to Paul and said, "I have to talk with you. I have something to tell you." When everyone had left, he said to Paul, "You don't know who I am but I'm a runaway slave."

Paul said, "Where are you from?"

"I've come from the city of Colosse."

"There are many believers in Colosse. Who is your master?"

"My master is Philemon."

"Well, I led him to the Lord in Ephesus several years ago, and he owes me everything."

"Well, what must I do?"

"You have robbed your master, you've run away from him, and under this system you'll have to return. As a Christian, you'll have to go back to him. But I know this man and I happen

to know his heart now, and when you go back you're going back differently from when you left. You left as a runaway slave. He was not a Christian and you were not a Christian. But now you're both Christians and that changes it."

Paul said in this letter to Philemon, "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season..." Isn't that a lovely way of expressing it? The fellow hadn't planned to leave for a season, he'd left for eternity – Onesimus never intended to go back. "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever." Listen to this: "Not now as a slave* but above a slave, a brother beloved, specially to me but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?" In other words, Paul now says to this man Philemon, "When he was with you, you called him Onesimus. He was profitable, but he became unprofitable. Now that you do not have 'Profitable,' he *is* profitable, and he will be valuable to you when he comes back."

This is the picture before us, and it is the story behind the headline that is here.

Now Paul sent this letter with Onesimus back to Philemon. A quartet of men left Rome one evening. I don't think the Roman government recognized that they were carrying probably the most valuable documents that ever left Rome: the epistles to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, and this little epistle to Philemon which Onesimus had tucked somewhere into his garment. He is on the way back to his master.

Now the question arises, what about slavery? Well, Paul is not discussing here the right or the wrong of slavery. I'd like for you to see that fact. I do hasten to say that the gospel, the coming of the Word of God, finally broke the back of slavery in this world. My beloved, everywhere the Bible has gone it has eventually ended slavery. It may take folk who are in the darkness of sin a long time, but their bondage is finally broken. In places where the Word of God has been taken away from the people, they go back into slavery. May I say to you, this is the Book and the only Book that has ever broken the back of slavery. But Paul is not discussing here the moral issue at all.

During the Civil War the North used the little epistle to Philemon to show that slavery was wrong, and by the same token the South used it to show that slavery was all right. Who was correct? Neither one was correct because this little epistle doesn't even discuss the right or wrong of slavery. Paul is not discussing the moral issue.

Then the next question is why doesn't Paul discuss the moral issue? We're living in a day when people want to be pragmatic, and they say that we should grapple with these issues directly. I say no. Paul was preaching a *gospel* that alone could destroy the awful curse of slavery. If he stirred up a revolt, it would cause an awful slaughter of slaves in the Roman Empire, for that happened time and time again, and Roman history bears testimony to it. In Rome a few years after this there was an outbreak led by one of the very capable ex-slaves which resulted in the slaughter of thousands of individuals. Paul is preaching a gospel that will do two things: It will change men's hearts, and then it will have a subsidiary effect upon society so that where this gospel is preached (even though men will not accept it) it will cause certain institutions to disappear.

For example, the great revival of John and Charles Wesley – although John Wesley never preached against slavery, never preached very much against drunkenness, I tell you, his preaching and the revival that resulted made England sober and delivered England from the revolution that came to France. And it also *ended slavery*.

* Since the Greek *doulos* is the word for both servant and slave, in the text of Scripture Dr. McGee substituted the English word *slave* rather than *servant* for historical accuracy.

My beloved, may I say to you that men's hearts need to be changed in our day. You may by direct action force people to do certain things, but until their hearts are changed you would create a dangerous situation. We need today to have this gospel preached again in America as it was preached years ago during the days of Finney and the days of Moody. If it were preached, it would solve 90 percent of the problems that we have today in this nation. We're going at the problem from the wrong direction. Paul went at it from the right direction. He knew that the gospel would sooner or later break the back of slavery, for no longer can Philemon treat Onesimus as a slave. Paul says, "He's your brother," and when a man is your brother you won't make him your slave.

What a transformation has taken place in this picture and in the home of Philemon!

When I read the epistle to Philemon I feel that I'm reading a personal letter that was not intended for public gaze. I am confident that when Paul wrote this little epistle he did not recognize that the Spirit of God was going to include it in the Bible. Now, he did know it when he wrote Romans. He knew it when he wrote 1 Corinthians. He knew it when he wrote Ephesians. But when Paul wrote to Philemon he was just opening up his heart and being very personal.

The first year I was in college each freshman was assigned to room with an upper classman, and I was put with one that I was glad to leave after the first semester. I found him one day reading my personal mail! And in order to get even, I began to read his mail. But I didn't do it very long. The reason I quit was that I had such a guilty feeling reading somebody else's mail. Well, I have that same feeling when I read Philemon. I feel like it's a private letter and it always is a little embarrassing to read somebody else's mail. Here Paul opens up his heart in quite an unusual way.

He says, "I'm sending Onesimus back to you." Evidently Onesimus was a trained man. He may have had a real gift for handling sensitive matters. Paul is now in prison, tied to a Roman soldier. He can't navigate about, and there are many things he would like to have done. When Onesimus was saved, Paul thought, *My, it would be wonderful to have this fellow here with me to be my assistant, to run on errands and to do other things for me.* He thought along that line. The fact of the matter is that he was almost on the verge of doing it, but then he said, "No, I can't do that. It would not be honorable. I must send him back to his master."

Notice what he wrote: "Whom I have sent again; thou, therefore, receive him, that is, mine own heart" (Philemon 12). That's the way we would say it, but in the original the word is *bowels*, "mine own bowels." Now, don't be afraid of that expression. After all, TV is pretty plain today. What he's talking about here is that which is psychological. You know, they've found out now that there are actually two places where you and I live and move and have our being. One place is the head, and not much happens up there – you've probably discovered that! But honestly, we live and move and have our being down lower in the body, as Paul is saying here. In other words, "When you receive Onesimus, you're not receiving a runaway slave who deserves to be crucified or to have the 'thief' brand put on him. No, you are receiving the *heart* of the apostle Paul, and that's the way I want you to treat him."

Now listen to Paul, "Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel" (Philemon 13). Believe me, Paul is really opening up, isn't he? In essence he says, "I thought about retaining him in your stead – because you said you'd do anything for me – that he might be helpful to me since I'm here in prison. But I thought it over and will do the Christian thing."

“But without thy mind would I do nothing, that thy benefit should not be, as it were, of necessity but willingly” (Philemon 14). If Paul had sent the letter back without Onesimus himself, Philemon might say, “Yes, that’s all right, but Paul put me on the spot, and I have to do it because he forced me to do it.” In effect Paul says, “I’m sending him to you, and if you want to send him back to me, that’s all right.”

I do not know this – we have no further word, but I think that on the return boat to Rome Onesimus was on board, coming back to minister to the apostle Paul.

Notice that Paul is talking about something quite wonderful in verse 16, “Not now as a slave, but above a slave, a brother beloved, specially to me but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?”

Back in verse 11 Paul played on the two words “Onesimus” and “not-Onesimus” – profitable and unprofitable. He says, “Who in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.” It is interesting that when the man became a Christian he became profitable; he became valuable. He wasn’t before. What a value is put upon a man when he becomes a child of God! What a different man it makes him, if you please. Now he says here, “Not now as a slave, but he’s a brother to you now.” The minute that a person comes to Jesus Christ and accepts Him as Savior, he’s brought into the body of believers. And in that body of believers, according to Galatians 3:26 and 28, something wonderful takes place: “For ye are all the sons [children] of God by faith in Christ Jesus.... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free” [they are not now Philemon the owner and Onesimus the slave] “there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

A new relationship has been established between Philemon and Onesimus.

Actually this is the only real integration the Word of God knows about, and this is an integration which has nothing to do with color, nothing to do with race, nothing to do even with the sexes, but it has everything to do with a person coming to Christ. If a person has not come to the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior, he is not a child of God. The most damnable heresy in the world today is the so-called universal fatherhood of God and universal brotherhood of man. The Bible knows nothing about it. Our Lord even said to the religious rulers, “Ye are of your father the devil...” (John 8:44). The one brotherhood that the Word of God knows about is that brotherhood that’s in Christ today. When a Jew and a Gentile, a free man and a slave, a rich man and a poor man, male and female come to Christ, they are brought into a brotherhood where they are made one in Christ, my beloved. That is the brotherhood that the Word of God knows something about, and it is real. It absolutely revolutionized the home of Philemon. Note what Paul said about him in the first seven verses. It revolutionized his business relations. It revolutionized his relationship with people – even with this man Onesimus, a runaway slave who had stolen from him. Why?

Will you notice what he says now in verses 17 and 18: “If thou count me, therefore, a partner, receive him as myself.” I think the conversation went something like this: Philemon, you always said to me, “Paul, I hope in your busy ministry you’ll be able to come to Colosse someday. I have a beautiful, palatial home and a lovely guest room. When you come and visit me, I’m going to put you in that guest room.” Paul says, “If I can ever find time I’ll be glad to come over and visit you,” but he never found time. Paul never did visit Colosse, but here he says, “Onesimus is coming. You’re not going to crucify him. You’re not going to beat him. You’re not going to mistreat him. I want you to receive him just as you would receive me. Put him in that lovely guest room you have.”

That's not all. Paul continues, "If he hath wronged thee [and he had], or oweth thee anything [and he surely did], put that on mine account." In other words, "Charge it. Here's my credit card. Onesimus can't pay. Charge it to me. I will repay it."

This scene now sinks into the shimmering shadows of the past. This incident that concerned the Apostle Paul and two believers in the early church now fades into the halls of history. I see another scene, a present-day scene, one that is being enacted right today, has been reenacted in my life, and if you're a child of God it has been reenacted in your life. I see the throne of God, and I see the Lord Jesus Christ sitting at His right hand, and I see a fellow who was a sinner by the name of Vernon McGee coming to God for forgiveness. The Word of God told me I was a slave of sin and that I was a runaway slave because I was in rebellion against God. I had wronged Him. I was a sinner. I was lost. A holy God could not receive me. The Son who had come down here about two thousand years ago and died on a cross turned to the Father and said, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee anything, put that on My account – I paid his penalty when I died on the cross. I paid the price."

Years ago in my Southland a fine young fellow made application to a church for membership, and the deacons were meeting to examine him. Believe me, they were fundamental, and they asked him the question, "How did you get saved?" This young man said, "Well, I did my part and God did His part." Knowing that salvation is the *gift* of God, not of works, the deacons asked him, "What was your part? And what was God's part?" He said, "My part was the sinnin'. God's part was the savin'. I done run from Him as fast as these rebellious legs and this sinful heart could carry me, and He done took out after me until He run me down."

My friend, that's the way I too got saved. That's the way you got saved, if you did. Jesus paid it all. He is the One who has the credit card today.

*Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.*

That's not all. "If thou count me, therefore, a partner, receive him as myself" (verse 17). Certainly the Lord Jesus is a partner with His Father. He is equal with the Father. The Father and the Son are one, and they have one mind. The Son says, "I want You to receive him just as You receive Me." My friend, and I'm being reverent when I say this: at this moment you have as much right in heaven as Jesus Christ has or you have no right there at all. You are either completely, perfectly saved in Him or you are completely lost apart from Him. The Son said to the Father, "I want You to receive Vernon McGee just like You receive Me," and that's the way He receives you, "accepted in the beloved." My friend, you can't be saved any more than you are today if you are in Christ. A million years from today you're going to find that I am much improved – I hope so! But I won't be any more saved a million years from today than I am right now because I am in Christ. The Bible says in Romans 8:1, "There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus...." What a picture is in this practical little epistle! It worked itself out in the first century of the Roman Empire and revealed that Christianity was the reality. May I say that for about twenty centuries it has been working its way out in the lives of multitudes.

Paul is gone. Onesimus and Philemon have already played their parts and have disappeared from the scene. But you are here today, and God the Father and God the Son are yonder, and

God is prepared to receive you. He *wants* to receive you. He loves you because the Lord Jesus came down here and paid the penalty for all your sins.

Don't argue with me that Onesimus was not worthy to occupy the guest room in the home of Philemon. He certainly was not, but somebody else was worthy, and somebody else made it possible for him because somebody loved him. I'm not worthy of heaven and you're not worthy of heaven, but Somebody loved us, and Somebody gives us His standing there!

Either your sin today is on you or it's on Christ. It can't be on a third person. You can't transfer it to anyone but Him. He's the only One who is willing to take your sin. He bore it. Christ said, "Put it on My account." He paid the penalty for it. He wants God to receive you, and God will receive you as a son! Will you receive Him?