

# Charge That to My Account

by Harry Ironside

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*The sermon explores the themes of forgiveness and grace through the story of Onesimus and Philemon, highlighting the gospel's message of reconciliation.*

**Duration:** 18:30

**Scripture:** Philemon 1:8

**Topics:** "Redemption Through Grace", "Gods Unconditional Love"

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## Description

This sermon delves into the story of Philemon and Onesimus, highlighting the transformation from a runaway slave to a redeemed man through the grace of God. It emphasizes the concept of substitution and acceptance, drawing parallels between Paul's intervention for Onesimus and Christ's atonement for believers. The message underscores the forgiveness and love extended by Philemon towards Onesimus as a reflection of God's unconditional love and grace towards sinners.

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## Transcript

I want to speak to you on one of the shortest books of the New Testament, the little book of Philemon. I'm going to ask your attention particularly to verses 8 through 18. Wherefore though I might be bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient or befitting, yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such and one of all the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds, which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me, whom I have sent again. Thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels, whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel. But without thy mind would I do nothing, that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldst receive him forever, not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on mine account.

I remember someone wrote concerning this little book years ago that it's the finest specimen of early personal Christian correspondence extant. And yet you know it would seem at first glance to have such a poor theme, for it's all about a wretched, runaway, thieving slave. But there is a bright side to it, for this

runaway slave had been converted, and this thief had through grace been changed to become an honest man.

The letter was written to a Christian householder by the name of Philemon, residing apparently in the city of Colossae, and it was written by the Apostle Paul. Some years before, Philemon had been brought to a saving knowledge of Christ through coming in contact with the Apostle Paul. Like a great many Christian householders in his day, he had bondmen in his family.

Christianity did not immediately drive slavery out of the world. It did not call upon Christian masters everywhere to set free their slaves, for as conditions were in the Roman Empire at the time when the Testament was written, many of these slaves, if set free, would have been in far, far worse and unhappy condition than if they remained as servants in Christian homes. And so in the household of Philemon there was a servant, a bondman, by the name of Onesimus.

Onesimus is said to mean helpful, but this man was anything but helpful. He had a good name, but he didn't live up to his name. There's lots of folks like that, you know, a lot of people that are called Christians, but they don't really live up to the name, many of them because they do not know the Christ of whom the word Christian speaks.

And so Onesimus, though so well named, proved to be an idle, desolate, thieving servant. And eventually he ran away from his master, and apparently before leaving Colossae he appropriated some of his master's treasure, whether it was a matter of goods or money we don't know, but at any rate he stole from his master. How long he was free we're not told, nor how he got from Colossae to where Paul happened to be at this time.

Paul was a prisoner in all probability at Rome, though some scholars think that he was still at Caesarea. But at any rate, the day came when Onesimus and Paul were brought face to face. You know, God knows so well how to bring the needy sinner and the messenger of his grace together.

And here was Onesimus with his burden of guilt, with an uneasy conscience, knowing that he had done wrong, brought face to face with Paul the Apostle, the man who had been used of God to bring the master, Philemon, to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether Onesimus was up to some rascality and was himself cast into prison or not we can't tell, or whether he learned that Paul was there and knowing something of him decided to call on him, we do not know. But at any rate, the result of their coming together was this, that Onesimus too was brought to know Christ as his Savior.

One can imagine that sometime after he had thus confessed Christ, he went to see Paul and unburdened his heart something like this, Paul, you know I've got a great load resting upon my conscience. I know that God has saved me, I know that he has forgiven me, and I rejoice in the salvation that I found in Christ. But you know, Paul, I was a servant in the household of Philemon, and after all, according to law, I owed him my service and my time.

But I decided to run away, and when I ran away I took with me some of my master's goods. Now I feel so convicted about that, and I'd like to straighten things up, but I don't know how I can do it. I've wasted all in my godless life, I've nothing wherewith to repay my master, and yet I feel that I ought to go back to him.

I ought to confess my wrongdoing, and I ought to put things right, but I don't know how to do it. Well, you know, Paul might have said, Onesimus, I know your master so well that I'm sure if I just write a letter

asking him to treat you leniently and give you a chance to work out the debt you owe, that he'll be willing to do it. But the truth of righteousness had so gripped Paul's soul that he wasn't content to do that.

He saw in this a beautiful opportunity to illustrate the gospel of the grace of God, and so he said as it were to Onesimus, yes, you should go home, you should give yourself up to your master, you have nothing to pay, you can't put things right, but Onesimus, I'm going to become your surety. I'll undertake to settle your debt, and I'm going to write a letter to Philemon, and I want you to take it to him. Don't plead anything for yourself, just hand him the letter in which he will learn that I'm willing to settle everything in a righteous way.

And so I can imagine, you know, the gratitude of Onesimus' heart, and how the day came when with Paul's letter in his bag, he started back to the city of Colossae. I've often tried to visualize the meeting between Onesimus and Philemon. I've imagined perhaps that Philemon might have been looking out the door of his house maybe one day, and looking down the road, and he would suddenly say to himself, why I wonder who that is coming up the road.

He walks just like that rascally, scoundrel Onesimus who robbed me and ran away from me. But I fancy it can't be he, he wouldn't be returning home. And yet it looks very much like him, and he would keep on watching and looking, and finally, sure enough, Onesimus turned in at the gate.

And I can imagine him stepping right up to him and saying, Philemon, master! And Philemon saying, well Onesimus, you're back, are you? What have you got to say for yourself? And I fancy Onesimus would simply hand to his master the letter which he had brought from the Apostle Paul. I think I see Philemon taking the letter eagerly, and looking up with wonder as he noticed the first word. Paul! Paul! Why Onesimus, have you seen Paul? Yes master, I've just come from him.

He's in prison, you know. Oh yes, dear old Paul, the man who led me to Christ. What does he say here? Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy, our brother.

Oh, that fine young fellow, Timothy, who is out preaching with him. On to Philemon, our dearly beloved and fellow laborer. My, how nicely he speaks of me.

Far better than I deserve. And to our beloved Apphia. Apphia, that was Mrs. Philemon.

Apphia, come here. Here's a letter from Paul, and I fancy Mrs. Philemon would come running, and maybe Archippus, the young preacher who is staying in their house behind her. As Philemon went on reading, and to Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house.

Why, Apphia would say, have you really? Oh, there's that miserable runaway slave of ours. Don't say a word. Let's see what Paul has to say about him, Apphia.

And so they would go on reading together. I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers. Hearing of thy love and faith, my how, how delightfully he writes.

Which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus and toward all saints. I wish I loved them better. That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus, with great joy and consolation.

And then what does he say here? I beseech thee for my son Onesimus. You know, Apphia, I fancy Onesimus has been playing the religious game with him in order to get his sympathy. I wonder if he ever told him how he'd robbed us, the bad way he behaved before he ran away.

Let's read on. Which in time past was to the unprofitable, I should say he was. But now profitable, hmm, I'm not so sure.

Whom I've sent again, might just as well have kept him. Thou therefore receive him, that is mine own bowels. My, he must have learned to think an awful lot of Onesimus.

Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered on to me in the bonds of the gospel. If he didn't work better for him than he did for me, it wouldn't amount to much. But without thy mind would I do nothing.

Well, he would have been perfectly welcome to have kept him. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season that thou should receive him forever. Not now as a servant, oh no, he's come to become too high tone to be a servant, has he? Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother, beloved.

Well, I should have to be assured that there was some real evidence of repentance before I would accept him as a brother, a brother beloved. If I thought that he had owned up to his crime, confessed his robbery, I'd feel different about it. What, oh wait, what does he say here? If he hath wronged thee, or o'erth thee ought.

Ah, then he has told Paul about the way he wronged me. If he hath wronged thee, or o'erth thee ought, put that on mine account. I, Paul, have written it with mine own hand.

I will repay it. I fancy Philemon's attitude underwent a complete change. I can see him turn to Onesimus and say, Onesimus, you've confessed then the wrong you did in robbing us and running away, behaving in such a rascally manner.

Yes, master, I'm awfully ashamed of it. I'd like to pay everything back. I'd like to settle up everything to the last penny, but I'm unable to do so.

But you see what Paul says. Ay, I do see what he says. He says that he'll be your surety, Onesimus.

He says he'll pay everything for you. Well then, on the strength of Paul's pleading, I shall have to forgive you, and I do forgive you, and forgive you freely. Isn't it a wonderful picture of the gospel? You know, it seems to me that this is the way the Lord Jesus Christ takes every poor, penitent sinner into the presence of the Father, and he says, My Father, he has wronged thee.

He o'erth thee much, more than he could ever pay, but all has been put to my account, and I've settled for everything on Calvary. I'm sure you know that Philemon never sent the bill to Paul. I think rather he inquired particularly concerning his circumstances, and probably mailed him a check for fifty dollars or something, I don't really know whether they had dollars or not in those days, but anyway, some equivalent.

I'm sure he would do that rather than send him a bill. But you know, dear friends, when the Lord Jesus Christ became my surety, he had to pay the uttermost farthing. When he went to Calvary's cross, and all my guilt was charged against him, he settled for everything, and then he cried, It is finished.

And on the basis of that finished work, God can freely forgive and justify completely every poor sinner who trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ. And then, of the forgiven sinner, Luther was right when he said, We are all gods, O Ness and I. But now, having been forgiven, it would have been a wonderful thing if Philemon had said, Well, now, Nessimus, you go on down there to the servants' quarters, take off your traveling togs, and get into your work clothes, and get busy. You've been away long enough.

But instead of that, I fancy he would turn to Apphia and say, Apphia, where shall we put him up? And perhaps a bit surprised, she would say, Put him up? Well, you know his room. He belongs out there with the rest of the bondmen. Ah, but look, see what Paul says.

He says, If thou count me there for a partner, receive him as myself. You see, Apphia, Paul has put it up to us to show what we think of him by the way we treat O Nessimus. If Paul came, we wouldn't send him down to the servants' quarters, would we? Oh, no, surely not, Philemon.

And we'd give him that best corner room up there with the sunshine and all the conveniences. We wouldn't think of putting him out among the servants. But don't you think we'd better put O Nessimus up there then? We're to manifest our love for Paul the way we treat him.

I don't know how all the details worked out, but I do know this, that when the Lord Jesus presents a redeemed soul to the Father, He says to him, My Father, if thou count me therefore thy partner, receive him as myself. And Scripture says, He hath made us to be accepted in the Beloved. And the Lord Jesus himself in his prayer to the Father, as recorded in the 17th chapter of John, uses these wonderful words, that the world may know that thou hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.

That's the measure of the acceptance that the Father gives to the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. As he is, so are we in this world. It's no longer a question of what we deserve, but it's a question of what Christ deserves.

We stand before God complete in him. There is no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus. Oh, am I addressing any poor needy sinner today? And is your conscience smarting because of wrong committed in days gone by and sins for which you can never make amends? Let me point you to Calvary's cross.

Let me remind you afresh that there upon that tree, the Lord Jesus was wounded for your transgressions, was bruised for your iniquities. The chastisement of your peace was upon him, and with his stripes you may be perfectly healed. Trust it is put down to your account, and the Father bestows upon you the same love that he bestows upon his beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so you'll see in this lovely little letter, beautiful picture then, of substitution and acceptance. The gospel of the grace of God acted out to show us just how God deals with a sinner who comes to him in the name of his blessed Son. Have you come? Have you put in your claim? Have you trusted him? If not, oh, I plead with you, come now as many as received him.

To them gave he power to become the children of God, even to them that believe in his name.

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