

Bound to Know Your True Character

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of examining ourselves to understand our true character and moral state, and provides practical guidance on how to do so.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23, 2 Corinthians 13:5

Topics: "Self-Examination", "True Character in Faith"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the critical importance of self-examination in understanding one's true character in the faith, urging believers to actively assess their moral standing before God. He outlines the necessity of this requirement for personal peace, honesty in faith, and effective service to others, arguing that uncertainty about one's spiritual state hinders both personal growth and outreach. Finney asserts that self-examination is not only possible but essential, providing practical steps for believers to engage in this process, including focusing on the realities of sin, their relationship with God, and their feelings towards others. He warns against the dangers of self-deception and encourages believers to actively engage with their faith and the world around them to gain clarity about their spiritual condition.

Transcript

TEXT.--"Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves"-- 2 CORINTHIANS xiii. 5.

IN speaking from this text I design to pursue the following order:

I. Show what is intended by the requirement in the text.

II. The necessity of this requirement.

III. The practicability of the duty enjoined.

IV. Give some directions as to the manner of performing the duty.

I. I am to show what is intended by the requirement in the text, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves."

It requires that we should understand our own hearts, that we should take the proper steps to make proof of our real characters, as they appear in the sight of God. It refers not to a trial or proof of our strength, or knowledge, but our moral character, that we should thoroughly test it, so as to understand it as it is. It

implies that we should know how God regards us, and what He thinks of us, whether He considers us saints or sinners. It is nothing less than a positive command, that we should ascertain our own true character, and settle the question definitely for ourselves, whether we are saints or sinners, heirs of heaven or heirs of hell.

II. I am to show the necessity of this requirement.

1. It is indispensable to our own peace of mind, that we should prove and ascertain our true character, as it is in the sight of God.

The individual who is uncertain as to his real character, can have no such thing as settled peace of mind. He may have apathy, more or less complete and perfect, but apathy is very different from peace. And very few professors of religion, or persons who continue to hear the gospel, can have such apathy for any length of time, as to suppress all uneasy feelings, at being uncertain respecting their true character and destiny. I am not speaking of hypocrites, who have seared their consciences, or of scoffers who may be given up of God. But in regard to others, it is strictly true that they must have this question settled in order to enjoy peace of mind.

2. It is essential to Christian Honesty.

A man who is not truly settled in his mind as to his own character is hardly honest in religion. If he makes a profession of religion when he does not honestly believe himself a saint, who does not know that that is not exactly honest? He is half a hypocrite, at heart. So when he prays, he is always in doubt whether his prayers are acceptable, as coming from a child of God.

3. A just knowledge of one's own character is indispensable to usefulness.

If a person has always to agitate this question in his mind, "Am I a Christian?"--if he has to be always anxiously looking at his own estate all the while, and doubtful how he stands, it must be a great hindrance to his usefulness. If when he speaks to sinners, he is uncertain whether he is not himself a sinner, he cannot exhort with that confidence and simplicity, that he could if he felt his own feet on a rock. It is a favorite idea with some people, that it is best for saints to be always in the dark, to keep them humble. Just as if it was calculated to make a child of God proud to know that he is a child of God. Whereas, one of the most weighty considerations in the universe to keep him from dishonoring God is, to know that he is a child of God. When a person is in an anxious state of mind, he can have but little faith, and his usefulness cannot be extensive till the question is settled.

III. The practicability of this requirement.

It is a favorite idea with some, that in this world the question never can be settled. It is amazing what a number of persons there are, that seem to make a virtue of their great doubts, which they always have, whether they are Christians. For hundreds of years it has been looked upon by many as a suspicious circumstance, if a professor of religion is not filled with doubts. It is considered as almost a certain sign, he knows nothing of his own heart. One of the universal questions put to candidates for admission has been, "Have you any doubts of your good estate?" And if the candidate answers, "O, yes, I have great doubts," that is all very well, and is taken as evidence that he is spiritual, and has a deep acquaintance with his own heart, and has a great deal of humility. But if he has no doubts, it is taken as evidence that he knows little of his own heart, and is most probably a hypocrite. Over against all this, I maintain that the duty enjoined in

the text is a practicable duty, and that Christians can put themselves to such a proof, as to know their own selves, and have a satisfactory assurance of their real character.

1. This is evident from the command in the text, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves." Will any one believe that God requires us to examine ourselves, and prove ourselves, and see what is our true character, when he knows it to be impossible for us ever to learn our true character?

2. We have the best possible medium of proof, to try ourselves, and prove our character, and that is our consciousness.

Consciousness gives the highest possible certainty as to the facts by which our characters are to be determined, and the great question is settled, What is our state before God? We may have, and ought to have, the same kind of evidence of our state before God as we have of our existence; and that is, consciousness. Nay, we cannot help having the evidence. Consciousness is continually testifying what are our states of mind, and it only needs for us to take notice of what consciousness testifies, and we can settle the question as certainly as we can our own existence.

3. God gives men such constant opportunities to act out what is in their hearts, that nothing but negligence can prevent their coming to a decision of the matter.

If men were shut up in dungeons, where they had no opportunity to act, and no chance of being influenced by circumstances, and no way to develop the state of their hearts, they would not be so much to blame for not knowing themselves. But God has placed them in the circumstances in which they are in this life on purpose, as He said to the children of Israel, to prove them, and to know what is in their hearts, and whether they will keep His commandments or no. The things around us must produce an impression on our minds, and lead us to feel and act in some way. And this affords opportunities of self-knowledge, when we see how we feel and how we are inclined to act in such diversified circumstances.

4. We are further qualified to trust our own true characters, by having a perfect rule to try them by.

The law of God is a true standard by which to try our characters. We know exactly what that is, and we have therefore an infallible and an invariable rule by which to judge of ourselves. We can bring all our feelings and actions to this rule, and compare them with this standard, and know exactly what is their true character in the sight of God, for God himself tries them by the same standard.

5. Our circumstances are such that nothing but dishonesty can possibly lead us to self-deception.

The individual who is self-deceived is not only careless and negligent, but decidedly dishonest, or he would not deceive himself. He must be to a great degree prejudiced by pride, and blinded by self-will, or he could not but know that he is not what he professes to be. The circumstances are so many and so various, that call forth the exercises of his mind, that it must be willful blindness that is deceived. If they never had any opportunities to act, or if circumstances did not call forth their feelings, they might be ignorant. A person who had never seen a beggar, might not be able to tell what were his true feelings towards beggars. But place him where he meets beggars every day, and he must be willfully blind or dishonest, if he does not know the temper of his heart towards a beggar.

IV. I will mention a few things as to the manner of performing this duty.

First. Negatively.

I. It is not done by waiting for evidence to come to us.

Many seem to wait, in a passive attitude, for the evidence to come to them, to decide whether they are Christians or not. They appear to be waiting for certain feelings to come to them. Perhaps they pray about it; perhaps they pray very earnestly, and then wait for the feelings to come which will afford them satisfactory evidence of their good estate. Many times they will not do anything in religion till they get this evidence, and they sit and wait, and wait, in vain expectation that the Spirit of God will come some time or other, and lift them out of this slough, while they remain thus passive and stupid. They may wait till doomsday and never get it in this way.

2. Not by any direct attempt to force the feelings into exercise which are to afford the evidence.

The human mind is so constituted, that it never will feel by trying to feel. You may try as hard as you please, to feel in a particular way. Your efforts to put forth feelings are totally unphilosophical and absurd. There is now nothing before the mind to produce emotion or feeling. Feeling is always awakened in the mind by the mind's being intensely fixed on some object calculated to awaken feeling. But when the mind is fixed, not upon the object, but on direct attempts to put forth feeling, this will not awaken feeling. It is impossible. The attention must be taken up with the object calculated to awaken feeling, or there will be no feeling. You may as well shut up your eyes and attempt to see, or go into a dark room. In a dark room there is no object to awaken the sense of sight, and you may EXERT yourself, and strain your eyes, and try to see, but you will see nothing. When the mind's attention is taken up with looking inward, and attempting to examine the nature of the present emotion, that emotion at once ceases to exist, because the attention is no longer fixed on the object that causes the emotion. I hold my hand before this lamp, it casts a shadow; but if I take the lamp away, there is no shadow; there must be light to produce a shadow. It is just so certain that if the mind is turned away from the object that awakens emotion, the emotion ceases to exist. The mind must be fixed on the object, not on the emotion, or there will be no emotion, and consequently no evidence.

3. You will never get evidence by spending time in mourning over the state of your heart.

Some people spend their time in nothing but complaining, "O, I don't feel, I can't feel, my heart is so hard." What are they doing? Nothing but mourning and crying because they don't feel. Perhaps they are trying to work themselves up into feeling! Just as philosophical as trying to fly. While they are mourning all the while, and thinking about their hard hearts, and doing nothing, they are the ridicule of the devil. Suppose a man should shut himself out from the fire and then go about complaining how cold he is, the very children would laugh at him. He must expect to freeze, if he will shut himself out from the means of warmth. And all his mourning and feeling bad will not help the matter.

Second. Positively. What must be done in this duty?

If you wish to test the true state of your heart with regard to any object, you must fix your attention on that object. If you wish to test the power or accuracy of sight, you must apply the faculty to the object, and then you will test the power and state of that faculty. You place yourself in the midst of objects, to test the state of your eyes, or in the midst of sounds, if you wish to test the perfectness of your ears. And the more you shut out other objects that excite the other senses, and the more strongly you fasten your minds on this one, the more perfectly you test the keenness of your vision, or the perfectness of your hearing. A

multiplicity of objects is liable to distract the mind. When we attend to any object calculated to awaken feeling, it is impossible not to feel. The mind is so constituted that it cannot but feel. It is not necessary to stop and ask, "Do I feel?" Suppose you put your hand near the fire, do you need to stop and ask the question, "Do I really feel the sensation of warmth?" You know, of course, that you do feel. If you pass your hand rapidly by the lamp, the sensation may be so slight as not to be noticed, but is none the less real, and if you paid attention strictly enough, you would know it. Where the impression is slight, it requires an effort of attention to notice your own consciousness. So the passing feeling of the mind may be so slight as not to occupy your thoughts, and thus may escape your notice, but it is not the less real. But hold your hand in the lamp a minute, and the feeling will force itself upon your notice, whatever be your other occupations. If the mind is fixed on an object calculated to excite emotions of any kind, it is impossible not to feel those emotions in a degree; and if the mind is intently fixed, it is impossible not to feel the emotions in such a degree as to be conscious that they exist. These principles will show you how we are to come at the proof of our characters, and know the real state of our feelings towards any object. It is by fixing our attention on the object till our emotions are so excited that we become conscious what they are.

I will specify another thing that ought to be borne in mind. Be sure the things on which your mind is fixed, and on which you wish to test the state of your heart are realities.

There is a great deal of imaginary religion in the world, which the people who are the subjects of it mistake for real. They have high feelings, their minds are much excited, and the feeling corresponds with the object contemplated. But here is the source of the delusion--the object is imaginary. It is not that the feeling is false or imaginary. It is real feeling. It is not that the feeling does not correspond with the object before the mind. It corresponds perfectly. But the object is a fiction. The individual has formed a notion of God, or of Jesus Christ, or of salvation, that is altogether aside from the truth, and his feelings in view of these imaginations are such as they would be towards the true objects, if he had true religion, and so he is deluded. Here is undoubtedly a great source of the false hopes and professions in the world.

V. I will now specify a few things on which it is your duty to try the state of your minds.

1. Sin--not your own particular sins, but sin itself, as an outrage committed against God.

You need not suppose you will get at the true state of your hearts, merely by finding in your mind a strong feeling of disapprobation of sin. This belongs to the nature of an intelligent being, as such. All intelligent beings feel a disapprobation of sin, when viewed abstractly, and without reference to their own selfish gratification. The devil, no doubt, feels it. The devil no more feels approbation for sin, when viewed abstractly, than Gabriel. He blames sinners, and condemns their conduct, and whenever he has no selfish reason for being pleased at what they do, he abhors it. You will often find in the wicked on earth a strong abhorrence of sin. There is not a wicked man on earth, that would not condemn and abhor sin, in the abstract. The mind is so constituted, that sin is universally and naturally and necessarily abhorrent to right reason and to conscience. Every power of the mind revolts at sin. Man has pleasure in them that commit iniquity, only when he has some selfish reason for wishing them to commit it. No rational being approves of sin, as sin.

But there is a striking difference between the constitutional disapprobation of sin, as an abstract thing, and that hearty detestation and opposition that is founded on love to God. To illustrate this idea. It is one thing for that youth to feel that a certain act is wrong, and quite another thing to view it as an injury to his father. Here is something in addition to his former feeling. He has not only indignation against the act as wrong,

but his love to his father produces a feeling of grief that is peculiar. So the individual who loves God feels not only a strong disapprobation of sin, as wrong, but a feeling of grief mingled with indignation when he views it as committed against God.

If, then, you want to know how you feel towards sin, how do you feel when you move round among sinners, and see them break God's law? When you hear them swear profanely, or see them break the Sabbath, or get drunk, how do you feel? Do you feel as the Psalmist did when he wrote, "I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved, because they kept not thy word?" So he says, "Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law." And again, "Horror hath taken hold upon me, because of the wicked that forsake thy law."

2. You ought to test the state of your hearts towards your own sins.

Look back on your past sins, call up your conduct in former times, and see whether you do cordially condemn it and loathe it, and feel as an affectionate child would feel, when he remembers how he has disobeyed or dishonored a beloved parent. It is one thing to feel a strong conviction that your former conduct was wicked. It is quite another thing to have this feeling attended with strong emotions of grief, because it was sin against God. Probably there are few Christians who have not looked back upon their former conduct towards their parents with deep emotion, and thought how a beloved father and an affectionate mother have been disobeyed and wronged; and who have not felt, in addition to a strong disapprobation of their conduct, a deep emotion of grief, that inclined to vent itself in weeping, and perhaps did gush forth in irrepressible tears. Now this is true repentance towards a parent. And repentance towards God is the same thing, and if genuine, it will correspond in degree to the intensity of attention with which the mind is fixed on the subject.

3. You want to test your feelings towards impenitent sinners.

Then go among them, and converse with them, on the subject of their souls, warn them, see what they say, and how they feel, and get at the real state of their hearts, and then you will know how you feel towards the impenitent. Do not shut yourself up in your closet and try to imagine an impenitent sinner. You may bring up a picture of the imagination that will affect your sympathies, and make you weep and pray. But go and bring your heart in contact with the living reality of a sinner, reason with him, exhort him, find out his cavils, his obstinacy, his insincerity, pray with him if you can. You cannot do this without waking up emotions in your mind, and if you are a Christian, it will wake up such mingled emotions of grief, compassion and indignation, as Jesus Christ feels, and as will leave you no room to doubt what is the state of your heart on this subject. Bring your mind in contact with sinners, and fix it there, and rely on it you will feel.

4. You want to prove the state of your mind towards God.

Fix your thoughts intently on God. And do not set yourselves down to imagine a God after your own foolish hearts, but take the Bible and learn there what is the true idea of God. Do not fancy a shape or appearance, or imagine how he looks, but fix your mind on the Bible description of how he feels and what he does, and what he says, and you cannot but feel. Here you will detect the real state of your heart. Nay, this will constitute the real state of your heart, which you cannot mistake.

5. Test your feelings toward Christ.

You are bound to know whether you love the Lord Jesus Christ or not. Run over the circumstances of his life, and see whether they appear as realities to your mind, his miracles, his sufferings, his lovely character, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, his intercession now at the right hand of the throne of God. Do you believe all these? Are they realities to your mind? What are your feelings in view of them? When you think of his willingness to save, his ability to save, his atoning death, his power, if these things are realities to you, you will have feelings, of which you will be conscious, and concerning which there will be no mistake.

6. What are your feelings towards the saints?

If you wish to test your heart on this point, whether you love the saints, do not let your thoughts run to the ends of the earth, but fix your mind on the saints by you, and see whether you love them, whether you desire their sanctification, whether you really long to have them grow in grace, whether you can bear them in your heart to the throne of grace in faith, and ask God to bestow blessings on them.

7. So in regard to revivals.

You wish to know what is the state of your feelings toward revivals, then read about them, think about them, fix your mind on them, and you cannot but have feelings that will evince the state of your heart. The same is true of the heathen, of the slaves, of drunkards, of the Bible, of any object of pious regard. The only way to know the state of your heart is to fix your mind on the reality of those things, till you feel so intensely that there is no mistaking the nature of your feelings.

Should you find a difficulty in attending to any of these objects sufficiently to produce feeling, it is owing to one of two reasons, either your mind is taken up with some other parts of religion, so as not to allow of such fixed attention to the specified object, or your thoughts wander with the fool's eyes, to the ends of the earth. The former is sometimes the case, and I have known some Christians to be very much distressed because they did not feel so intensely as they think they ought on some subjects. Their own sins, for instance. A person's mind may be so much taken up with anxiety and labor and prayer for sinners, that it requires an effort to think enough about his own soul to feel deeply, and when he goes on his knees to pray about his own sins, that sinner with whom he has been talking comes right up before his mind, and he can hardly pray for himself. It is not to be regarded as evidence against you, if the reason why you do not feel on one subject in religion is because your feelings are so engrossed about another, of equal importance. But if your thoughts run all over the world, and that is the reason you do not feel deeply enough to know what is your true character, if your mind will not come down to the Bible, and fix on any object of religious feeling, lay a strong hand on yourself, and fix your thoughts with a death-grasp, till you do feel. You can command your thoughts: God has put the control of your mind in your own hands. And in this way, you can control your own feelings, by turning your attention upon the object you wish to feel about. Bring yourself, then, powerfully and resolutely, to that point, and give it not over till you fasten your mind to the subject, and till the deep fountains of feeling break up in your mind, and you know what is the state of your heart, and understand your real character in the sight of God.

REMARKS.

1. Activity in religion is indispensable to self-examination.

An individual can never know what is the true state of his heart, unless he is active in the duties of religion. Shut up in his closet, he never can tell how he feels towards objects that are without, and he never can

feel right towards them until he goes out and acts. How can he know his real feelings towards sinners, if he never brings his mind in contact with sinners? He goes into his closet, and his imagination may make him feel, but it is a deceitful feeling, because not produced by a reality. If you wish to test the reality of your feelings towards sinners, go out and warn sinners, and then the reality of your feelings will manifest itself.

2. Unless persons try their hearts by the reality of things, they are constantly subject to delusion, and are all the time managing to delude themselves.

Suppose an individual shut up in a cloister, shut out from the world of reality, and living in a world of imagination. He becomes a perfect creature of imagination. So it is in religion, with those who do not bring their mind in contact with realities. Such persons think they love mankind, and yet do them no good. They imagine they abhor sin, and yet do nothing to destroy it. How many persons deceive themselves, by an excitement of the imagination about missions, for instance; how common it is for persons to get up a great deal of feeling, and hold prayer meetings for missions, who really do nothing to save souls. Women will spend a whole day at a prayer meeting to pray for the conversion of the world, while their impenitent servant in the kitchen is not spoken to all day, and perhaps not in a month, to save her soul. People will get up a public meeting, and talk about feeling for the heathen, when they are making no direct efforts for sinners around them. This is all a fiction of the imagination. There is no reality in such a religion as that. If they had real love of God, and love of souls, and real piety, the pictures drawn by the imagination about the distant heathen would not create so much more feeling than the reality around them.

It will not do to say, it is because their attention is not turned towards sinners around them. They hear the profane oaths, and see the Sabbath breaking and other vices, as a naked reality before their eyes, everyday. And if these produce no feeling, it is in vain to pretend that they feel as God requires for sinners in heathen lands, or anywhere. Nay, take this very individual, now so full of feeling for the heathen, as he imagines, and place him among the heathen, transport him to the Friendly Islands, or elsewhere, away from the fictions of imagination, and in the midst of the cold and naked reality of heathenism, and all his deep feeling is gone. He may write letters home about the abominations of the heathen, and all that, but his feeling about their salvation is gone. You hear people talk so about the heathen, who have never converted a soul at home, rely upon it that is all imagination. If they do not promote revivals at home, where they understand the language, and where they have direct access to their neighbors, much less can they be depended on to promote the real work of religion on heathen ground. The churches ought to understand this, and keep it in mind in selecting men to go on foreign missions. They ought to know that if the naked reality at home does not excite a person to action, the devil would only laugh at a million such missionaries.

The same delusion often manifests itself in regard to revivals. There is an individual who is a great friend to revivals. But mark; they are always the revivals of former days, or of revivals in the abstract, or distant revivals, or revivals that are yet to come. But as to any present revival, he is always aloof and doubtful. He can read about the revivals in President Edward's day, or in Scotland, or Wales, and be greatly excited and delighted. He can pray, "O Lord, revive thy work, O Lord, let us have such revivals, let us have a pentecost season, when thousands shall be converted in a day." But get him into the reality of things, and he never happens to see a revival in which he can take any interest, or feel real complacency. He is friendly to the fictitious imaginings of his own mind, he can create a state of things that will excite his feelings, but no naked reality ever brings him out to cooperate in actually promoting a revival.

In the days of our Savior, the people said, and no doubt really believed, that they abhorred the doings of those who persecuted the prophets. They said, "If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them of the blood of the prophets." No doubt they wondered that people could be so wicked as to do such things. But they had never seen a prophet, they were moved simply by their imagination. And as soon the Lord Jesus Christ appeared, the greatest of prophets, on whom all the prophecies centered, they rejected him, and finally put him to death with as much cold-hearted cruelty as ever their fathers had killed a prophet. "Fill ye up," says our Savior, "the measure of your fathers, that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth."

Mankind have always, in every age of the world, fallen in love with fictions of their own imagination, over which they have stumbled into hell. Look at the Universalist. He imagines a God that will save everybody, at any rate, and a heaven that will accommodate everybody; and then he loves the God he has made and the heaven he has imagined, and perhaps will even weep with love. His feelings are often deep, but they are all delusive, because excited by fiction and not by truth.

3. The more an individual goes out from himself, and makes things not belonging to himself the subject of thought, the more piety he will have, and the more evidence of his piety.

Religion consists in love, in feeling right and doing right, or doing good. If therefore you wish to have great piety, don't think of having it by cultivating it in a way which never caused piety to grow; that is, by retiring into a cloister and withdrawing from contact with mankind.--If the Lord Jesus Christ had supposed such circumstances to be favorable to piety, He would have directed them so. But He knew better. He has therefore appointed circumstances as they are, so that His people may have a thousand objects of benevolence, a thousand opportunities to do good. And if they go out of themselves and turn their hearts upon these things, they cannot fail to grow in piety, and to have their evidences increasing and satisfactory.

4. It is only in one department of self-examination that we can consistently shut ourselves up in the closet to perform the duty. That is when we want to look back and calmly examine the motives of our past conduct. In such cases it is often necessary to abstract our thoughts and keep out other things from our minds, to turn our minds back and look at things we have done and the motives by which we were actuated. To do this effectually it is often necessary to resort to retirement, and fasting, and prayer. Sometimes it is impossible to wake up a lively recollection of what we wish to examine, without calling in the laws of association to our aid. We attempt to call up past scenes, and all seems to be confusion and darkness, until we strike upon some associated idea, that gradually brings the whole fresh before us. Suppose I am to be called as a witness in court concerning a transaction, I can sometimes regain a lively recollection of what took place, only by going to the place, and then all the circumstances come up, as if but of yesterday. So we may find in regard to the re-examination of some part of our past history, that no shutting ourselves up will bring it back, no protracted meditation, or fasting, or prayer, till we throw ourselves into some circumstances that will wake up the associated ideas, and thus bring back the feelings we formerly had.

Suppose a minister wishes to look back and see how he felt, and the spirit with which he had preached years ago. He wishes to know how much real piety there was in his labors. He might get at a great deal in his closet on his knees, by the aid of the strong influences of the Spirit of God. But he will come at it much more effectually by going to the place, and preaching there again. The exact attitude in which his mind was before, may thus recur to him and stand in strong reality before his mind.

5. In examining yourselves, be careful to avoid expecting to find all the graces of the Christian in exercise in your mind at once.

This is contrary to the nature of mind. You ought to satisfy yourselves, if you find the exercises of your mind are right, on the subject that is before your mind. If you have wrong feelings at the time, that is another thing. But if you find that the emotions at the time are right, do not draw a wrong inference, because some other right emotion is not in present exercise. The mind is so constituted, that it can only have one train of emotions at a time.

6. From this subject you see why people often do not feel more than they do.

They are taking a course not calculated to produce feeling. They feel, but not on the right subjects. Mankind always feel on some subjects, and the reason why they do not feel deeply on religious subjects is, because their attention is not deeply fixed on these subjects.

7. You see the reason why there is such a strange diversity in the exercises of real Christians.

There are some Christians whose feelings, when they have any feeling, are always of the happy kind. There are others whose feelings are always of a sad and distressing kind. They are in almost constant agony for sinners. The reason is, that their thoughts are directed to different objects. One class are always thinking of the class of objects calculated to make them happy; the other are thinking of the state of the church, or the state of sinners, and weighed down as with a burden, as if they had a mountain on their shoulders. Both may be religious, both classes of feelings are right, in view of the objects at which they look. The apostle Paul had continual heaviness and sorrow of heart on account of his brethren. No doubt he felt right. The case of his brethren, who had rejected the Savior, was so much the object of his thoughts, the dreadful wrath that they had brought upon themselves, the doom that hung over them, was constantly before his mind, and how could he be otherwise than sad?

8. Observe the influence of these two classes of feelings in the usefulness of individuals.

Show me a very joyful and happy Christian, and he is not generally a very useful Christian. Generally, such are so taken up with enjoying the sweets of religion, that they do but little. You find a class of ministers, who preach a great deal on these subjects, and make their pious hearers very happy in religion, but such ministers are seldom instrumental in converting many sinners, however much they may have refreshed and edified and gratified saints. On the other hand you will find men who are habitually filled with deep agony of soul in view of the state of sinners, and these men will be largely instrumental in converting men. The reason is plain. Both preached the truth, both preached the gospel, in different proportions, and the feelings awakened correspond with the views they preached. The difference is, that one comforted the saints, the other converted sinners.

You may see a class of professors of religion who are always happy, and they are lovely companions, but they are very seldom engaged in pulling sinners out of the fire. You find others always full of agony for sinners, looking at their state, and longing to have souls converted. Instead of enjoying the antepast of heaven on earth, they are sympathizing with the Son of God when He was on earth, groaning in His spirit, and spending all night in prayer.

9. The real revival spirit is a spirit of agonizing desires and prayer for sinners.

10. You see how you may account for your own feelings at different times.

People often wonder why they feel as they do. The answer is plain. You feel so, because you think so. You direct your attention to those objects which are calculated to produce those feelings.

11. You see why some people's feelings are so changeable.

There are many whose feelings are always variable and unsteady. That is because their thoughts are unsteady. If they would fix their thoughts, they would regulate their feelings.

12. You see the way to beget any desired state of feeling in your own mind, and how to beget any desired state of feeling in others.

Place the thoughts on the subject that is calculated to produce those feelings, and confine them there, and the feelings will not fail to follow.

13. There are multitudes of pious persons who dishonor religion by their doubts.

They are perpetually talking about their doubts, and they take up a hasty conviction that they have no religion. Whereas, if instead of dwelling on their doubts they will fix their minds on other objects, on Christ for instance, or go out and seek sinners, and try to bring them to repentance, rely upon it, they will feel, and feel right, and feel so as to dissipate their doubts.

Remember, you are not to wait till you feel right before you do this. Perhaps some things that I said to this church have not been rightly understood. I said you could do nothing for God unless you felt right. Do not therefore infer, that you are to sit still and do nothing till you are satisfied that you do feel right. But place yourself in circumstances to make you feel right, and go to work. On one hand, to bustle about without any feeling is no way, and on the other hand, to shut yourself up in your closet and wait for feeling to come, is no way. Be sure to be always active. You never will feel right otherwise. And then keep your mind constantly under the influence of those objects that are calculated to create and keep alive Christian feelings.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/bound-to-know-your-true-character/>

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