

Caught in the Public Eye

by Charles Finney

Prioritizing the praise of men over the praise of God leads to hypocrisy, compromise, and a lack of true holiness.

Scripture: Matthew 23:33, John 12:43, 2 Corinthians 10:12, 2 Timothy 3:12, James 2:10

Topics: "Hypocrisy", "True Commitment to God"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the dangers of seeking the praise of men over the praise of God, emphasizing that true self-love aligns with God's law, while selfishness leads to hypocrisy. He warns that many professing Christians are motivated by a desire for reputation rather than a genuine commitment to glorifying God, often conforming to public sentiment instead of biblical standards. Finney challenges listeners to examine their hearts and motives, urging them to prioritize God's authority over societal approval. He calls for a radical commitment to Christ, encouraging believers to stand firm in their faith regardless of public opinion. Ultimately, he stresses that true Christianity requires a complete surrender to God's will, regardless of the cost.

Transcript

"For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God"--John 12:43

A plain distinction exists between self-love, or the simple desire for happiness, and selfishness. Self-love, the desire for happiness and dread of misery, is a part of our frame as God made us and intended us to be. Its indulgence, within the limits of the law of God, is not sinful. But whenever it is pursued contrary to the law of God, it becomes sinful.

When the desire for happiness or the dread of misery becomes our controlling principle, and we prefer our own gratification to some greater interest, it becomes selfishness. If to avoid pain or procure happiness we sacrifice greater interests, we violate the great law of disinterested benevolence. It is no longer self-love, acting within lawful bounds, but selfishness.

Professing Christians who are moved by hope or fear are moved sometimes by self-love and sometimes by selfishness. Their supreme object is not to glorify God but to secure their own salvation. The friends of God and the friends of man agree in many things, and if you look only at the things in which they agree, you cannot distinguish between them. Only a close observation of those things in which they differ will reveal that the main design of the latter class is not to glorify God but to secure their own salvation. In that way we can see their supreme object. When they do the same thing, outwardly, as the servants of God,

they do them from entirely different motives. Consequently, the acts themselves are, in the sight of God, of an entirely different character.

COMMITMENT TO SELF

Some professing Christians "love the praise of men more than the praise of God." I don't mean that a mere regard for reputation has led this class to profess the faith. Christianity has always been too unpopular with most people to render it a general thing to become professing Christians from a regard to reputation. But when becoming a Christian increases popularity, a complex motive operates--the hope of securing happiness in a future world and an increase in reputation here.

Many are led to profess Christianity when, on close examination, the leading object is the good opinion of their fellowmen. Their commitment turns on this. Although they profess to be sincere Christians, you can see by their conduct that they won't do anything to forfeit this good opinion of men. They will not encounter the persecution that they must to root sin out of the world.

Impenitent sinners are always influenced by one of two things in their attempts to mimic Christianity. Either they do them out of regard to natural principles--as compassion or self-love--or from selfishness. They are done either out of regard to their own reputation or happiness or the gratification of some natural principle that has no moral character. They love the praise of men more than the praise of God.

People who make the praise of men their idol do what the apostle Paul says certain persons did in his day. For that reason they remained ignorant of true doctrine: they "Measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12)

Instead of making Jesus Christ their standard of comparison and the Bible their rule of life, many individuals aim at no such thing. They never seriously dreamed of making the Bible their standard. Their great concern is to do as many things and be as pious as the other people in their churches. Their object is to maintain a respectable profession of Christianity. Instead of seriously seeking what the Bible requires and asking how Jesus Christ would act in such and such a case, they look at "common" Christianity and are satisfied with mimicking it. Their object is not to do what the Bible says but what is respectable.

These people do not trouble themselves about elevating the standard of holiness around them. They are not troubled that the general standard of holiness is low in the Church or that it is difficult to bring sinners to repentance. They think the standard at the present time is high enough. While the real friends of God and man are complaining about the standard and trying to wake up the Church, it seems to them like a meddlesome, uneasy disposition.

When Jesus Christ denounced the scribes and Pharisees, they said, "He hath a devil" (John 10:20). Today they may say, "Why, he is denouncing our doctors of divinity and our best men, and he even dares to tell us that except our righteousness exceeds theirs, we cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven. What a bad spirit he has!"

A large part of the Church has this spirit, and every effort to open the eyes of the Church and to make Christians see that they live like hypocrites only excites malice and causes reproach. They say, "What a bad spirit he shows, so unkind, nothing like the meek, kind, and loving spirit of the Son of God." They forget how Jesus Christ cursed those who has the reputation of being the most pious people in that day. It was the hypocritical spirit exhibited by professing holy men that roused His soul, moved His indignation,

and called forth His burning torrents of denunciation. Jesus complained about people who set up patterns of piety, and He called them hypocrites and thundered over their heads the terrible words, "How can ye escape the damnation of hell!" (Matthew 23:33)

A RELIGION OF REPUTATION

Too many people are scrupulous in observing what the public considers acceptable, while they easily forget what public sentiment does not enforce.

Consider, for example, prohibition. How many are there who yielded to public sentiment what they never would yield to God or man? At first they waited to see what would happen, They resisted giving up alcohol. But when that became popular, and they found that they could do very well without it, they gave it up. But they were determined to yield no further than public sentiment drove them. It was not their objective to slay the monster but to maintain a good character. They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Many individuals keep the Sabbath not because they love God but because it is respectable. This is obvious because they keep it while they are among their acquaintances or where they are known. But when they travel to where they are not known--where it will not be a public disgrace--you will find them skipping church altogether.

This class of people abstain from all sins that are abhorred by the public, but they do other things just as bad that are not frowned upon. They neglect things that are ordained in the Word of God. Where an individual habitually disobeys any command of God, it is certain that the obedience he appears to render is not from love to God but from other motives. He does not, in fact, obey any command of God.

The apostle James has settled this question: "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). Obedience to God's commands implies an obedient state of the heart; therefore, nothing is obedience that does not imply a supreme regard to the authority of God.

If a man's heart is right, then he regards whatever God commands as more important than anything else. And if a man regards anything as superior to God's authority, that is his idol. Whatever we supremely regard is our God--reputation, comfort, riches, honor, or whatever we place first in our hearts.

Whatever a man's reason is for habitually neglecting anything he knows to be the command of God or sees to promote the Kingdom of Christ, he regards that as supreme. There is nothing acceptable to God in any of his services. His religion is the religion of public sentiment. It is public sentiment to which he yields obedience, in all his conduct, and not the glory of God.

How about you? Do you habitually neglect God's requirement because they aren't sustained and enforced by public sentiment? If you claim to be a Christian, I presume that you do not neglect any requirement that is strongly urged by public sentiment.

But do you habitually neglect some duties? Do you practice things accepted by men that you know are contrary to the law of God? If you do, then you regard the opinions of men more than the judgment of God.

A man who is obedient at home will often toss off a glass of brandy or step up to a bar and order liquor the second he is away. When I was in the Mediterranean, at Messina, a gentleman asked me if I would go to a bar with him. "What! A minister go to a bar?"

"Why, you are away from home, and no one would know it."

"But would not God know it?" It was plain that he thought that, although I was a minister, I could go to a bar when I was away from home. No matter if God knew it, as long as men did not know it. And how did he get that idea? By seeing ministers who do just such things!

If you allow yourselves any secret sins and think nobody know about it, know that God sees it and has already written down your name--hypocrite. You are more afraid of disgrace in the eye of mortals than of disgrace in the eye of God. If you loved God supremely, it would be a small thing to you that everybody else knew your sins, in comparison with having them known to God. If tempted in anything, you would exclaim, "What! Shall I sin under the eye of God?"

Professing Christians may not practice any secret sins, but they neglect duties like private prayer. They go to communion and appear very pious on Sunday, but their prayer closet is unknown to God or man. Reputation is their idol. They dread to lose their reputation more than to offend God.

These people have a conscience in things that are popular and no conscience at all on things that are not scrutinized by the public. You can preach to them and clearly prove it--even make them confess that it is their duty. If, however, it is not a matter of reputation, they will go on as before, Show them a "Thus saith the Lord" and make them see that their actions are inconsistent with Christian perfection and contrary to Jesus' interests, and still they will not change. They regard the requirements of public opinion and love the praise of men more than the praise of God.

FANATICAL OR FASHIONABLE?

This class of people generally dread the thought of being considered fanatical. They are ignorant that the world is wrong! The public sentiment of the world is against God, and everyone who intends to serve God must set his face against the sentiment of the world. In a world of rebels, public sentiment is obviously as wrong as the controversy with God. The world is wrong, and God's ways are directly against their ways. Consequently, it is true, and always has been true, that "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). They will be called fanatical, superstitious, irrational, etc; they always have been, and they always will be.

But these opinion-oriented people will never go further than is consistent with the expectations of worldly men. They say they must do this or that in order to influence such men. Opposite this are the true friends of God and man. Their leading aim is to turn the world upside down, bring all men to obey God, and remold opinions of men to conform to the Word of God.

Many professing Christians are intent on making friends on both sides and always take the middle course. They avoid the reputation of being over righteous on the one hand and, on the other hand, of being lax or irreligious. For centuries a person could maintain a reputable profession of religion without ever being called fanatical. And the standard is still so low that probably the great mass of the Protestant churches are trying to occupy this middle ground.

They mean to have friends on both sides. They are not considered reprobates or fanatics. They are fashionable Christians!

They may be called fashionable Christians for two reasons. One is that their style of religion is popular and fashionable; and the other is that they generally follow worldly fashions. Their aim is to please the world.

No matter what God requires, they are determined to keep peace with the enemies of God. They have more regard to men than to God. And if they ever have to choose between displeasing their friends and neighbors and offending God, they will offend God. If public sentiment clashes with the commands of God, they will yield to public sentiment.

Although they will not exercise self-denial to gain the applause of God, They will exercise great self-denial to gain the applause of men. The men who gave up liquor because public sentiment rendered it necessary will give up wine, also, whenever a powerful public sentiment demands it--and not until then.

If a minister of this class preaches a sermon, he is more anxious to know what the people thought of it than to know what God thought of it. And if he fails, the disgrace of it with men cuts him ten times more than the thought that he has dishonored God or hindered the salvation of souls.

When some secret sin has been found, he is more distressed about it because he is disgraced than because God is dishonored. Or, if he falls into open sin, he cares as much about the disgrace as the sin.

These fashionable Christians are more anxious about their appearance in the eyes of the world than in the eyes of God. Females of this character are vastly more anxious how the body appears in the eyes of men than how the heart appears in the eyes of God. Such a one will take all week getting everything in order to make herself appear lovely, but will not spend half an hour in her closet to prepare her heart before God.

Everybody can see what this religion is the moment it is held up to view. Nobody is at a loss to say what that man or that woman's name is--hypocrite. They will go into the house of God with their heart dark as midnight, while everything in their external appearance is attractive and respectable. They must appear well in the eyes of men, no matter what God sees. The heart may be dark, disordered, and polluted, and they don't care as long as the eye of man detects no blemish.

OPPOSING THE LIGHT

Many people refuse to confess their sins in the manner that the law of God requires. If they are required to confess more than they think consistent with their reputation, they are more anxious how it will affect their character than whether God is satisfied.

Search your hearts, you that have made confessions, and see what most affects your minds--what God thought of it or what men thought of it. Have you refused to confess what you knew God required because it would hurt your reputation among men? Will not God judge your hearts?

People who profess Christ are often so ashamed to do their duty that they will not do it. When a person is too ashamed to do what God requires, it is plain that his own reputation is his idol. How many people are ashamed to acknowledge Jesus Christ, ashamed to reprove sin, and ashamed to speak out when Christ is attacked? If they supremely regarded God, could they ever be ashamed of doing their duty?

Suppose a man's wife was slandered, would he be ashamed to defend her? By no means. If his children were abused, would he be ashamed to help them? Not if he loved them. It would not be shame that would deter him from defending his wife or children.

These people will not take decided ground when they are among the enemies of truth, where they would be subject to reproach for doing it. They are bold when among friends and make a great display of their courage. But when put to the trial, they will deny the Lord Jesus Christ before His enemies. They will put

Him to open shame rather than rebuke wickedness or speak out in His cause among His enemies.

Many oppose all advancing light on practical subjects. They are disturbed by every new proposal that draws on their wallets or breaks in upon their habitual self-indulgence. You may talk and preach as much in favor of it as you please. There is only one way to reach these people, and that is by creating a new public sentiment. When you have convinced--through the Holy Spirit--a sufficient number in the community to create a public sentiment in its favor, then they will adopt your new proposals, but not before.

Some professing Christians are often opposed to men, measures, and things that are unpopular and subject to reproach; but when they become popular, they fall in with them. Let a minister go through the churches in any state and wake them up. While he is little known, these people are not afraid to speak against him. But if he gains influence, they will commend him and profess to be his warmest friends. Before Jesus' death, He had a certain degree of popularity. Multitudes followed Him through the streets, crying, "Hosanna, Hosanna!" But as soon as He was arrested, they all turned and began to cry, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!"

As they flow with the tide when a man is reproached, they will flow with the tide when he is honored. One exception is when they have become so committed to the opposition that they cannot change without disgrace. They they will be silent until another opportunity comes up for letting out the burning fires within them.

Very often when a revival begins, it is opposed by certain members of the church. They do not like to have such things carried on and are afraid there is too much excitement. But the work goes on, and soon they seem to fall in and go with the multitude. Then, when the revival is over and the church grows cold again, you will find them renewing their opposition to the work. In the end, they may induce the church itself to criticize the very revival that they had so much enjoyed.

The same has been true in regard to missions, and if anything unfavorable to missions occurred, you would find plenty of these fair weather supporters turning to the opposition.

THE FEAR OF MAN

If anything is proposed to promote Christianity, opinion-loving people are very sensitive and careful not to have anything done that is unpopular. They ask what the other churches will think. If it is likely to bring reproach on their church or their minister, in view of the ungodly or the other churches, they are distressed about it. No matter how much good it will do or how many souls it will save, they do not want to have anything done to injure the respectability of their church.

The true friends of God and man are always forming and correcting public sentiment on all points where it is wrong. With all their hearts, they search out evils in order to reform the world and drive iniquity from the earth. The other class are always following public sentiment as it is. They are ready to brand as imprudent or rash any man or anything that goes to stem the tide of public sentiment and turn it the other way.

People can easily make themselves believe certain things are acts of piety that are actually only acts of hypocrisy. They do the things that outwardly pertain to piety, and they give themselves credit for being holy. Their motives are all corrupt and hollow, not one of them drawn from a supreme regard to God's authority. This is manifest from the fact that they do nothing except where God's requirements are backed by public sentiment. Unless you aim to do all your duty and yield obedience in everything, the piety you

claim is sin against God.

How many of you would break out into open sin if not for the restraints of public sentiment, the fear of disgrace, and the desire to gain the credit of virtue? True holiness is from a regard to the authority of God, despite public sentiment. Otherwise, you do it for the sake of gaining credit in the eyes of men. But if you expect any favor from God, you will assuredly be disappointed. The only reward He will bestow upon such hypocrisy is damnation.

Who of you will agree to take the Bible for your standard, Jesus Christ for your example, and do what is right whatever man may say or think? Everyone that is not willing to take this ground must regard himself as a stranger to the grace of God. He is by no means in a state of justification. If he is not resolved upon doing what he knows to be right, it is positive proof that he loves the praise of men more than the praise of God.

To be a Christian is to be governed by the authority of God in all things, to live not by hopes and fears but by supreme consecration of yourself unto God. If you intend to be a Christian, you must count the cost. I will not flatter you. I will never try to coax you to become religious by keeping back the truth. You must give yourselves wholly unto Christ. You cannot float along to heaven on the waves of public sentiment.

Who is on the Lord's side? Who is willing to say, "We will no longer do evil but are determined to do the will of God in all things--let the world think or say of us what it may"? If you are willing to do this, then kneel and pray that God would accept and seal your solemn covenant to obey Him in everything.

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