

# Christian Character

by Charles Finney

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*The sermon explores the nature of sin and its relationship to the Christian life, emphasizing the importance of obedience to truth and the distinction between Christians and sinners.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:48, John 8:34-36, Romans 6:14, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 5:16-17, Ephesians 2:10, James 1:22, 1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 2:1-2, 1 John 3:9

**Topics:** "Christian Character", "Holiness"

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## Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the essence of Christian character, asserting that true believers, born of God, do not habitually commit sin due to the transformative power of God's truth in their lives. He clarifies misconceptions about sin, explaining that it is not inherent in our nature but rather a choice influenced by our will. Finney distinguishes between the nature of a Christian and a sinner, highlighting that Christians are characterized by their commitment to truth and holiness, while sinners are driven by selfishness and external influences. He warns against the common belief that Christians must sin regularly, urging believers to strive for a life of obedience to God's commands. Ultimately, Finney calls for self-examination to ensure that one's life aligns with the biblical definition of a true Christian.

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## Transcript

'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.'--1 John 3:9.

In this discourse I shall,

I. INQUIRE WHAT SIN IS NOT.

II. WHAT IT IS.

III. WHAT TO BE BORN OF GOD IS NOT.

IV. WHAT IT IS.

V. WHAT THE SEED SPOKEN OF IN THE TEXT IS NOT.

VI. WHAT IT IS.

VII. WHAT IS NOT INTENDED BY THE ASSERTION THAT WHOSOEVER IS BORN OF GOD DOES NOT AND CANNOT COMMIT SIN.

VIII. WHAT IS INTENDED BY IT.

IX. HOW A CHRISTIAN MAY BE DISTINGUISHED FROM A SINNER.

I. What sin is [not].

1. Sin is not a part of the soul or body.

2. It is nothing infused into either soul or body. Some talk as if they supposed the whole being, soul and body to be saturated with sin, than which, nothing can be more absurd.

3. It is no taint of corruption in, nor a lapsed state of the constitution. The Bible does not make it so, and reason certainly affirms it to be something entirely different from this.

4. It is nothing which is or can be transmitted from parents to children by natural generation.--This would contradict the Bible definition of sin, and the supposition is in itself a ridiculous absurdity.

5. Nor does it consist in any weakness, debility, or inability, either natural or moral, to obey God. The Bible nowhere makes it consist in this, and certainly common sense does not.

6. Nor does it consist in any appetite, passion, or mere feeling. These we have already seen, in a former lecture, are constitutional, involuntary, and in themselves wholly destitute of all moral character.

7. Nor does it consist in any degree of excitement of these in appropriate circumstances; for in the appropriate circumstances, they are excited of necessity.

8. Nor does it consist in any state or act of the intelligence; for this also acts of necessity, and we can only be responsible for its operations just so far as we can regulate it by willing.

9. Nor does it consist in any outward actions; for these are necessitated by the supreme end chosen, and in themselves are wholly destitute of all moral character.

II. What sin is.

1. As was said in a former lecture, the primary faculties of the mind are Intelligence, Sensibility, and Free Will. This we know from consciousness. The Intelligence is that power which thinks, affirms, reasons, and reflects. The Sensibility, is the power of feeling. To this power are referred all appetites, desires, passions, or emotions whatever. The Free Will, is the power which wills.

2. The will is always influenced by motives originating either in the intelligence or the sensibility. The will always chooses some object, or acts in reference to some motive; and we know by consciousness that these motives are either duties perceived by the intelligence, or the awakened susceptibilities of the sensibility, which always invite the mind to seek the gratification of its appetites and passions for their own sake. I do not mean that the action of the intelligence and the sensibility are so isolated from each other, that either of them acts in perfect independence of the other; for we know that every thought and affirmation of the intelligence is accompanied by some feeling of the sensibility, and on the contrary that every feeling awakens in the intelligence, affirmations, thoughts, and reasonings to a greater or less

extent. But what I mean is, that some motives originate in, and are addressed to the will by the intelligence, and some on the contrary, originate in the sensibility, and as such, influence the will. The distinction of which I am speaking is just what every one means, when speaking of the difference between being led by propensity or passion, and reason.--The intelligence and sensibility mutually influence each other, but one or the other takes the lead. In other words, the mind, which is a unity, in thinking feels, and in feeling, thinks. When the intelligence reveals and imposes obligation, it is always echoed by the sensibility; and on the contrary, when some appetite or desire is excited in the sensibility, the intelligence is awakened into thought respecting it. In the one case the sensibility follows in the wake of the intelligence, and in the other, the intelligence in the wake of the sensibility, but in all cases the action both of the sense and intelligence is indirectly under the control of the will, which by its sovereign power always determines which shall be the ascendant.

3. The mind affirms itself to be under obligation to obey the law of the reason just as I suppose the mind of God imposes obligation on Him. The holiness of God consists in his obeying the law revealed and imposed on Him by his own infinite and eternal reason, and so the holiness of all moral beings must consist in their voluntary conformity to whatever their own reason affirms to be obligatory. Holiness then is that state of the will or heart which consists in the voluntary consecration of the whole being to God.

4. Sin is the exact opposite of this, and consists in the consecration, by the will or heart, of the whole being to the gratification of self. This is selfishness, which we have already endeavored to show is the substance of all the sin in the universe.--Whatever, in the action of the will or heart, is not conformed to the law of love, as perceived by the reason, is sin, whether it be omission of duty or the commission of that which is positively prohibited. Entire conformity of heart and life, therefore, to all known truth is holiness, and nothing short of this is, or can be. If persons deny this, it is because they do not know what they say, and have not the idea of holiness before their mind at all. The law of God is one--a unity, and to talk of being partly conformed to it, and partly not, is to overlook the very nature both of the law and of conformity to it. The law of God requires perfect conformity of life and heart to all the truth perceived, and this is moral perfection in any being, and is the only sense in which any being can be morally perfect in any world. Suppose there is a moral pigmy whose standard of truth is No. 1. Now if he fully conforms to that, he does his whole duty. So you may increase the scale to 2, 5, 10, 20, and moral perfection will still consist in conformity to the light possessed. Suppose you ascend the scale to ten thousand or a million, it is still the same until you arrive at God Himself, and this is just what constitutes the moral perfection of God. All the truths in the universe are known to Him with absolute certainty, and He conforms to all He knows. Since his knowledge admits of no increase, his holiness admits of none, while that of all finite beings does and will to all eternity. Angels doubtless sustain innumerable relations of which they are totally ignorant, and to which they are not morally conformed, but their state of will is such, that as fast as they learn them they conform to them, and hence their holiness is constantly increasing; and so it must be from the lowest to the highest degree of moral capacity. Every thing, then, short of living up to the light we have, is sin, and every moral act is either right or wrong.

III. What to be born of God is not.

1. Regeneration does not consist in the creation of any new faculties. We have faculties enough, more than we use well, and do not need any more.

2. Nor does it consist in a constitutional change. A constitutional, would be far enough from a moral change, and it would be hard to tell what good it would do.

3. Nor does it consist in implanting, or infusing any piece, parcel, or physical principle of holiness into the soul. What can be meant by a principle of holiness, when such language is used to designate something aside from holiness itself?

4. Nor does it consist in a change of the constitutional appetites and propensities. These have no moral character in themselves and need no change. They only need to be rightly regulated.

5. Nor does it consist in the introduction or implantation of a new taste. There could be no virtue in regeneration if it consisted in any of these things, and they all are mistakes overlooking the nature of virtue. But,

#### IV. What is it to be born of God?

1. To be born of God is to have a new heart.

2. We have seen that the old or wicked heart is the same as the carnal mind, and that the carnal mind or wicked heart consists in the devotion of the will to self gratification. Self gratification is the ultimate end chosen.

3. Now to be born again, or of God, is to make a radical change in the ultimate intention, or choice of an end. It is called being born again because it is a change of the whole moral character and course of life. Christ says, 'except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall, in no case, enter into the kingdom of heaven.' The phraseology is figurative and emphatic, because when a moral being has changed his ultimate intention, he must of necessity live an entirely new life, perfectly the reverse of what it was before.

4. It is called, a being born of God, or from above; because sinners are influenced to make this voluntary change by the word and Spirit of God. I say voluntary change, because every one is perfectly conscious that he was voluntary in it, and because it must of necessity be voluntary, if it has any moral character in it; and I might add, that unless it is voluntary, backsliding from it would be naturally impossible, and obedience necessary, which are as false in fact, as they are absurd in theory.

#### V. What the seed which remaineth in Christians is not.

1. It is not a physical germ, root, sprout or taste, inserted into the soul. If so, then falling from grace is naturally impossible, and perseverance naturally necessary. This theory robs religion of all virtue whatever.

2. It is not love nor any other holy exercise. In other words, it is not religion at all. Religion is voluntary conformity to the law of God, and to say that this remains in the christian could have no meaning. The truth is, the Apostle, in the text, is asserting why this voluntary conformity is continued. It then cannot be the seed.

3. It does not consist in any new principle implanted in the soul.

#### VI. What this seed is.

1. It is the word or truth which re-generated him--that is, in view of which he changed his ultimate intention or heart. Truth is frequently called seed in the bible,--'Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.' 'Of his own will begat He us with the

word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.'

2. This word or truth is called the seed of God, because it is introduced and made known to the mind by the Holy Ghost. Hence we are said to be 'begotten of God.' It is his truth that quickens the mind into right voluntary action. Now every one knows, by his own consciousness, that this is the way in which he was born again. Hear a young convert tell his experience. He begins to tell of some truth which arrested his attention, and convicted him; how he thought of one thing after another, that he perceived this, and that and the other thing to be true as he never did before, and that finally he made up his mind, in view of what he thus saw was true, to repent. Now what is he doing? Why, he is giving the history of his regeneration, and giving it in the detail. But does he know the history of his regeneration? As well as he knows any thing else under Heaven. To be sure he did not see the Spirit, no[r] did he perceive that it was the Spirit, because the Spirit directs to Christ, but he is conscious that he did see the truth as he never saw it before. And he is conscious that he was perfectly voluntary under its influence.

3. This seed, which has once broken the power of selfishness, remains in him, that is, in his memory, so that he can sin only by letting it slip. 'Let that therefore abide in you which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son and in the Father.' This truth, as I said before, is not a piece of something which God puts into you, nor is it religion, nor love, but it is that which once subdued your will and will not cease to influence you, only as you let it slip.

VII. What is not intended by the assertion that whosoever is born of God does not and cannot commit sin.

1. It cannot mean that a holy being has not power to commit sin. Adam was a holy being and he sinned, as did also the "Angels that kept not their first estate." If there were a lack of natural power to sin, there would be no virtue in obedience. This position would contradict facts innumerable. Perhaps very few have ever been born of God who have not afterwards been guilty of sin. This is a matter of consciousness. Most of the histories recorded in the Bible of good men, show that they did fall into sin, and the Bible everywhere assumes that there is danger of this. It would destroy free agency and the possibility of being sinful or holy.

2. It would make John contradict himself, for he was writing to regenerate persons, but he all along assumes that they could sin, and were in danger of sinning. Nor can it mean that one who is born of God never does in any instance sin under the force of temptation. This would contradict all the rest of the Bible.

VIII. What is intended by it.

1. It is intended that since the truth has once broken the power of passion, and appetite, and gained the consent of his will, and since it remains in him, that is, in his memory, he will not, as a matter of fact, consent to indulge himself in any form of sin.

2. Cannot is here used in its popular sense, as it generally is in the Bible. Such language must not be strained nor cut to the quick. It is used just as it is now used in popular conversation. Suppose I say I cannot take twenty-five dollars for my watch. What do I mean? Not that I have not power to take it, but that I am unwilling to take it. If I say I cannot throw this table across the room, the nature of the case shows that I use cannot, to indicate a natural impossibility, but in the former case I use it merely in the sense of a strong unwillingness. It is in this sense that it is used in the text, just as it is used every day in every store on Broadway.

3. It is intended then that with all Christians, holiness is the rule and sin the exception--if there be sin at all, that sin is only occasional as opposed to habitual, that it is so unfrequent, that, in the strong language of John, it may be truly said, that they do not sin. If sin is not so rare as to be merely occasional instead of habitual, the text is absolutely false. For example; Suppose I should say that such a man is not a drunkard. I should not be understood to say that he had never been drunk in his life, but I should certainly be understood to say that at most his fits of intoxication were extremely rare. John, as a writer, expresses himself very strongly, and I might read many passages from his writings, showing that he does not intend such terms in an absolute sense, but to state, that, in Christians, their aversion to sin, and their purpose of obedience are so strong and fixed, that it may be said in strong language they cannot sin. 'And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: For sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that He was manifested to take away our sins; and in Him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not; whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him neither known Him. Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot commit sin, because he is born of God.'

4. It must be intended that Christians only sin by being diverted from the consideration of the truth by the force of temptation. This is the least that this and similar passages can mean. It is not intended to assert what ought to be true of Christians, but what is so as a matter of fact. He is drawing the very portrait of a Christian and hanging it up for all the Church in all ages to look at.

IX. How a Christian may be distinguished from a sinner.

1. They cannot be distinguished by profession. For doubtless many sinners make profession and some Christians do not.

2. Nor can they be distinguished by their observance of the forms of religion, nor by their creeds or opinions, nor by their church standing, nor by the emotions or feelings which they manifest. Emotions are as natural to the impenitent as to Christians, and are no distinguishing test. But,

3. The Christian is benevolent, while the sinner is selfish. These are their ultimate states of mind, and will manifest themselves in both by a natural necessity.

4. The Christian is influenced by reason, and the sinner by mere feeling. If you wish to influence a sinner, you must appeal to his feelings, for nothing else will move him. He has not learned to yield his will to the dominion of truth. But the Christian has devoted himself to truth, and is always influenced by it. He knows that the feelings effervesce, boil or freeze, just as circumstances vary; while truth is forever the same. Said a brother to me not long since, "I am distressed about my wife. She is very full of feeling, and can be affected by appeals which are calculated to awaken it; but I cannot influence her by truth." I replied, that this was truly a dark sign; and I now say, that I should have no hope for my wife nor anyone else, who cannot be influenced to duty, by the simple truth, unaided by appeals to the Sensibility.

5. The Christian obeys all known truth, on all subjects, while sinners conform to truth only on those subjects that are enforced by public opinion. Truth is the christian's law, and he conforms to it as fully in opposition to, as in conformity to public opinion. But mark! a sinner will conform to some truths outwardly, but not to all, nor really to any in his heart. Public sentiment is a god which most people obey and worship.

6. Christians adhere to principle in the face of all opposition, while sinners quail before it. Let opposition rise ever so high, you will see the true Christian stand like a rock, and breast the dashing wave--he will not shrink or quail. Not so with the sinner. He will go along well enough, while all is smooth, but when the tide begins to rise, you see him yield to its force and drive along with it withersoever it goes. "By and by he is offended."

7. It can never be said of a true Christian, that, 'sin has dominion over him.' But some form of sin has dominion over sinners universally. Sometimes it assumes one type and sometimes another, but sin is their master.

8. Christians obey the spirit and letter of the moral law, but sinners obey only the letter, even if they do that.

9. Cause a Christian to see the truth on any subject and he will obey it; but a sinner will see and acknowledge it, and continue on in his sins. His appetites, and not his conscience, are his master.

#### REMARKS.

1. Every real Christian lives habitually without sin. Nothing is more common than to find large classes of professors of religion who acknowledge that they are living in sin. You ask them--Do you not know that this is wrong? Yes, they say, but no person is expected to live without sin in this world. We must sin some. Now, as the Bible is true, such persons are deceived, and in the way to hell. If that is religion, what is Christianity? But, you will say--"I know what you say of this text cannot be the meaning, for it is not my experience." Poor soul! this excuse will do you no good, for God's word is true, whatever your experience is, and in the day of eternity, where will you be if you rely on this? Now do you cry out and say, "why this is awful; for if it be true what will become of the great mass of Christians?" Let me tell you all true Christians will be saved, but hypocrites God will judge. Said a woman to a minister not long since, "Do you confess your sins?" confess your sins! What did she mean by that? Why, she meant to inquire whether every time he prayed he confessed, not that he had been a sinner in times past, but, that he was now actually sinning against God? She, with many other professors, actually seemed to think that Christians should sin a little all the while in order to keep them humble, and to have something to confess. Indeed!

2. It is a dangerous error to inculcate that Christians sin daily and hourly. It sets the door wide open for false hopes, and the effect on the Church is that it is thronged with the victims of delusion.

3. Equally dangerous is it, to say that their most holy duties are sinful--that "sin is mixed with all we do." What! Then John should have said--'Whosoever is born of God commits sin daily and hourly, notwithstanding the seed of God remaineth in him, for sin is mixed with all he does!' It is a palpable matter of fact that whatever is holy is not sinful. Holiness is conformity to all perceived obligation--it is an act of the will, and must be a unity. If then holiness be a unity, a compliance with all perceived obligation, there is not and cannot be sin mixed in it. Says Christ, 'Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.' And James says--'For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.' A person therefore, knowing obligation to rest on him, and not discharging it, is living in sin and is not a Christian. It is in vain to appeal to experience against the Bible.

4. All who live in the omission of duty or commission of what is contrary to known truth, are living in habitual sin and are not Christians.

5. How infinitely different is the doctrine of this discourse, from the common view, and what is generally inculcated. Said a celebrated minister in giving the definition of a Christian--"He has a little grace and a great deal of devil." Now where did such a sentiment as that come from? From the Bible? No. But from a ruinous accommodation of the Bible to a false standard. And yet so current is such a sentiment, that if you deny it, they look astonished, and say--"Why, I guess you are a perfectionist." Now read the language of the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church, right along side of what John says. Says the Confession of Faith--"No mere man since the fall, is able, either of himself, or by any grace received in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and in deed."--And to this almost all the standards of the Church agree. It is the common sentiment of the Church. Now I would ask how this accords with what John says, in the text and in many other places in this epistle? Let me say he is not here speaking of some Christians who have made rare attainments, but of the common attainment. Now, which is right? By which will you be tried at the Judgment? By the Bible or the common standards? You know very well which.

6. When any, therefore, live in the omission of known duty, or commission of what they know to be contrary to truth, we are bound to say they are not Christians. This is not a want of charity but a love of the truth. Suppose an infidel should meet you with the Bible in his hand and should point out what it describes a Christian to be, and should ask you, "do you believe the Bible speaks the truth?" And should then point to those Christians who live daily and hourly in the omission of known duty, in a violation of perceived obligation, and ask you if you believe they are Christians, what would you say? What would you feel bound to say to maintain the honor of the Bible? The answer is plain. The truth is, the common views on this subject are a flat denial of the Bible, and are a ruinous accommodation to the experience of carnal professors.

7. Now, beloved, if this is so it becomes us, to ask ourselves, whether our experience accords with the Bible or the popular standard. Not whether we think we were converted some time ago, not what feelings we may have had: but are we at present conformed to all the truth we know. Does the seed remain in us? The test is a habitual perfection of moral character. He who has it is a Christian. He who has it not is not a Christian. Now where are you? Where would you be to night if summoned to the Judgment? Could you lay your hand on your heart and say, 'Lord Thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love Thee?' Thou knowest that my life is a life of conformity to all thy known will?

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