

Dependence on Christ

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding and believing in our dependence on Christ for all things, including moral agency and spiritual growth.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5-6, Isaiah 41:10, John 15:5, Romans 7:18, 2 Corinthians 3:5, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 4:13, Colossians 1:17, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:7

Topics: "Dependence on Christ", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the critical nature of dependence on Christ, asserting that without Him, we can do nothing of spiritual value. He explains that this dependence is not merely theoretical but must be a practical reality in the life of a believer, as it is essential for holiness and moral action. Finney warns against the human tendency to overlook this truth, which can lead to pride, self-righteousness, and spiritual failure. He encourages believers to actively acknowledge their reliance on Christ for strength and guidance, highlighting that true faith involves a continual remembrance of this dependence. Ultimately, understanding and embracing this doctrine is vital for a fruitful Christian life.

Transcript

"Without me ye can do nothing." -- John 15:5.

In discussing this subject I shall show--

I. THE MEANING OF THE TEXT.

II. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN IT.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING AND BELIEVING IT.

IV. THE PRONENESS OF THE HUMAN HEART TO OVERLOOK AND PRACTICALLY DENY IT.

I. The meaning of the text.

The context shows that Christ means to affirm an impossibility, for he says, "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me." Now whatever metaphysical or philosophical distinctions we may be disposed to make here, it is plain that Christ intended to affirm the impossibility of doing any thing without him or independently of him. This inability

extends to every thing, but the context shows that he means in this passage to affirm it only of holiness or goodness.

II. What is implied in it.

The text implies that we are not required to do anything without him. If it be impossible to do any thing without him, it cannot be our duty to do it; for it can never be a man's duty to do what is impossible.

Again, that every command implies a corresponding promise, that is, if we are required to do any thing by Christ, the very requirement is a virtual promise or proffer of all the aid we need to make it possible for us to perform it. Indeed, the command in itself is an implied proffer of all needed help.

It is often said that the commands of God are addressed to us as moral agents, and that as such, because we are moral agents, we are bound to obey, irrespective of any assistance from God. Now rightly understood this language is correct; but it is extremely liable to be misunderstood. The enquiry is, What is implied in moral agency? There is a difference between acting morally, and simply having the natural powers requisite for such action. A man may have eyes, but without light he cannot see, and is therefore under no obligation to see. So a man may possess the powers of a moral being, but without light on the subject of duty he is not prepared for moral action. He is a moral being in the sense of having the requisite natural powers; but light is the indispensable condition of bringing these powers into action, or in other words light is the indispensable condition of moral agency. His moral powers can be exercised on no subject until he has light upon it. He is under no moral obligation further than he has light. A heathen who has never heard of Christ is under no obligation to believe in Christ, and in respect to Christ he has not the responsibilities of a moral agent. He possesses those faculties which will render him responsible as soon as Christ is made known to him; but without some knowledge of Christ, he can be under no moral obligation to believe in him.

Light therefore, is a condition of moral agency, and, of course, of moral obligation. If supernatural light is needed, then supernatural light is the condition of moral obligation: if merely natural light or the light of nature is sufficient, then that is a condition of moral obligation. If the light of the written word of God is sufficient, then that is a condition. The kind and degree of light requisite to impose moral obligation varies upon different subjects. The mere light of nature may be sufficient to impose obligation in reference to a great multitude of duties; but on many of the great questions of the gospel, the light of divine revelation is needed to impose moral obligation, for without this revelation, the mind can know nothing of these duties.

To a right apprehension of many truths of the gospel, the illumination of the Holy Spirit is needed, and without his influence the mind does not and cannot comprehend the length and breadth, and depth and height of these truths, cannot apprehend them in any such sense as that an individual can embrace Christ and know either the Father or the Son without the Holy Ghost.

Now when Christ says, "Without me ye can do nothing;" he doubtless means to affirm that without divine light shining upon the pages of inspiration and upon the works of God--without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, holiness is impossible to us. The assertion of the text therefore implies that divine light is proffered to us, and that this light is given by Christ.

Again, the text implies the absolute Deity of Christ. If Christ is not God it is absurd and false for him to say, "Without me, ye can do nothing."

III. The importance of understanding and believing the doctrine of the text.

1. If we do not understand that we are dependent on Christ, we shall not and cannot believe it. It is impossible to believe what we do not understand. This is sometimes doubted, but if properly understood, the proposition must be self-evident. We cannot believe unless the mind apprehends that which is to be believed. Yet I may believe a fact without being able to explain the philosophy of the facts. For example, I may believe the fact that Christ died for sinners without being at all able to understand the high policy of Jehovah's government upon which the doctrine of atonement is based, or which rendered his death necessary. Now I am not required to believe any thing respecting the philosophy of the atonement, but simply the fact--a thing which I can understand. It may be gratifying and useful for me to search out the philosophy of it, but it is not at all necessary to my salvation that I should believe any thing more than the fact of the atonement. So I may believe thousands of facts and truths, the philosophy of which I cannot comprehend; but I am not able nor am I required to believe any thing more in any case than I can understand. The doctrine of the Father, the Son and Holy Ghost, I can understand; that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and that the Holy Ghost is God; but the exact sense in which these are three, and the sense also in which they are one, I cannot comprehend, nor am I under any obligation to comprehend it, nor to believe any thing more respecting this or any other doctrine than I can comprehend.

It is therefore of great importance with respect to the doctrine of our dependence upon Christ that we should understand the fact as a fact. Whether or not we are able to understand the philosophy of this dependence is of no consequence. It is enough for us to understand that such is the fact, that without Christ we can do nothing.

2. To understand this doctrine is more than to admit it. I may admit a thing in theory which after all I don't understand. I may admit multitudes of truths, yea any and all the truths of the gospel without really understanding one of them. The truth of our dependence upon Christ is generally admitted, but not so generally is it rationally understood.

3. Properly to understand it is to realize it--to perceive it's truth; and have in the mind a felt realization of it's truth.

4. To believe this truth is more than to hold it in theory. A man may hold in theory the whole Confession of Faith, he may defend it, may argue in favor of it, and suppose himself to believe it, while in fact in the gospel sense he does not believe a word of it. Many who professed faith in the doctrine of the Second Advent of Christ, have held it and defended it as a theory, but manifestly have not believed it. Faith is the yielding up of the mind to be influenced by truth apprehended by the intellect. It is the mind's confiding, trusting, receiving a truth. Now nothing is more common than for persons to hold and defend a truth in theory which they do not really believe. To believe the doctrine of our dependence upon Christ is to commit or surrender the mind up to the influence of this truth--to repose on Christ--to confide the soul really to his keeping.

5. To believe this truth implies the continual remembrance of it. It implies that we hold the mind in the attitude of dependence and trust. Suppose I am leading a little child by the hand, I give him my finger and lead him along upon the brink of a frightful precipice. I tell him, Without me you will fall. Now if he believes this, he will hold fast to my hand. His mind will be in a constant attitude of depending, trusting, holding on to me. Now this illustrates what I mean by believing in our dependence upon Christ. The mind that believes in this will not attempt to do any thing without Christ.

But take another illustration. Suppose here is a man who has but one leg. He never attempts to walk without a crutch. When he sits down, he lays his crutch by his side, or sets it up within reach. Whenever he attempts to walk, the very first movement of his mind is towards his crutch. Just so with the mind that believes in the doctrine of dependence upon Christ. It is just as natural for this mind to throw itself upon Christ, in the performance of every duty as it is for the lame man to throw himself upon his crutch.

Again, not to understand and believe this is real infidelity in respects to Christ. It is a real rejection of the gospel of Christ and of Christ himself. No man understands and believes the gospel in any saving sense, who does not understand and believe his universal dependence upon Christ.

Again, the rejection of this doctrine renders the soul proud and presumptuous. If a man depends upon his own powers, unenlightened by the Spirit of Christ, he is depending upon the bruised reed of his own resolutions, and must inevitably find himself in perpetual condemnation.

Again, to reject this doctrine is to dishonor Christ greatly, and as I have said, to discard his gospel entirely.

Again, to reject or overlook this doctrine leaves the soul to neglect due watchfulness. If a man is not sensible of his constant dependence upon the indwelling Spirit of Christ, he will not feel the necessity of watchfulness and prayer so as to retain the Spirit of Christ.

Again, the rejection of this doctrine fosters self-righteousness. If a man gets the idea that without the divine support and enlightenment, he performs acts that are acceptable to God, this is one of the worst forms of self-righteousness.

Again, the rejection of this doctrine makes us the sport of temptation. A man is certain to be overcome if he attempts to resist temptation in his own strength, just as certain as a man of one leg would be to fall if he should attempt to run without his crutch.

Again, the rejection of this doctrine leads to ultimate discouragement. When persons make attempts to stand in their own strength and find themselves continually overcome, they are soon led to doubt seriously whether there is any such thing as standing before the power of temptation. Finding themselves perfectly impotent in their own strength and not believing in Christ as they ought, they fall of course.

Again, the understanding and belief of this truth tends to results opposite to those just mentioned. To believe this truth causes the mind to be careful not to grieve the Spirit of Christ. It renders the soul humble and empties it of all its proud, self-righteous dependence upon self. It naturally engages the soul to love Christ, to honor him, and watch carefully against doing any thing that might displease him. It strips the mind of all dependence upon its own resolutions and unaided efforts; it teaches the mind where to go in the hour of temptation, and throws it upon Christ its all-sufficient support; keeps the soul out of bondage, begets gratitude, fixes the attention and thoughts upon Christ and engages the soul to live by faith in him.

IV. Notice the proneness of the human mind to overlook and deny this truth.

In some sense everyone knows it to be true, and yet few realize its truth in any such sense as to make a practical use of it. This is evident partly from the fact that they do not think of it. They do not realize it as the lame man realizes that he cannot walk without his crutch. His dependence upon his crutch is with him an omnipresent reality. He always thinks of it whenever he attempts to walk. Now if an individual really receives this truth, it will be to him an omnipresent reality. The fact of his dependence on Christ will be so deeply settled in his mind that he will just as naturally and certainly turn to Christ for support as the lame

man turns to his crutch.

But another evidence that few realize and believe this truth, we have in the fact that so little gratitude is felt and manifested to Christ. If our dependence were an omnipresent reality, we could not fail, having performed any duty, to feel our obligation to Christ for having wrought in us to will and do this thing. We should not take the credit to ourselves, but be grateful to him.

Another evidence that this truth is not believed by many, is the fact that they are so little afraid to sin against Christ. It cannot be that they would be so reckless of sinning against him if they believed themselves absolutely dependent on him for all their own right actions. Suppose that you were entirely dependent upon someone to lead and uphold you every step you take; could you suffer yourself to abuse your guide and supporter?

Another evidence we have in the fact that there is so little praying against temptation, so little looking to him for grace to support and strengthen us at every step. The Bible teaches that God works in us to will and to do of his good pleasure--that all our springs are in him--that he is our life, and that there is no good in us only as it is wrought in us by the Spirit of Christ. Now that there is not much hearty confidence in these truths, even in the church, manifests itself in many ways. For example, there is but little prayer comparatively for restraining grace, for upholding grace, for the indwelling and energizing of the Holy Spirit. There is but little of the spirit of thanksgiving for the constant aid and agency of the Spirit of God.

Again, if for a short time Christians are kept from a besetting sin, they soon cease to thank him for sustaining grace, and lose a sense of the fact that he is truly keeping them above it. They think they have so overcome the temptation to that sin, that they are dead to it, and their tendency in that direction has ceased. Their taking up this notion often makes it necessary for Christ to withhold his restraining grace, in order to remind them that not they but he has kept them from falling. Thus he teaches them by bitter experience, what they will not learn from his word, that without him they can do nothing.

Again, when persons are kept for any length of time from any particular besetting sin, they soon cease to pray against it, and to pray for Christ's help to restrain it and keep it down. This shows that they overlook the fact that Christ is every day and all the time holding up their feet in the path of obedience, and that they would instantly fall but for him. When they thus cease to pray and watch against sin, Christ lets them fall, to remind them of their dependence. But why should he remind them of it if they are not prone to forget it?

Again, in proportion as they are kept above sin, they are prone to lose a sense of the fact that the grace of Christ upholds them. If they are supported just enough to feel the keen force of temptation and the necessity of cleaving to Christ continually, they do not lose a sense of dependence; but if Christ only for a short time lifts them so high that temptation does not seem to touch them, they immediately become forgetful of their dependence, wax self-confident, dishonor and grieve his Spirit, and fall into temptation.

Again, as we do not see, nor hear, nor directly feel the hand that supports us, we are constantly prone to forget that we are supported. The influence which Christ exerts is not a physical but a moral one. It is the power of truth and persuasion, the power of divine light which sustains the mind. Now as we do not directly see the agency of Christ employed in sustaining us, we are very apt to overlook the fact that his invisible agency is our constant support.

Again, thoroughly to learn the lesson of our dependence upon Christ so that it shall be an ever-present reality to us, is one of the most difficult things in the Christian religion. There is nothing more contrary to

the natural pride and independence of human nature. There is not a doctrine of the Bible which we are more prone to disbelieve and practically reject than this. It may be admitted as a theory forever, without being ever believed.

Again, it is one of the most difficult things, always to remember practically that we cannot take one step in the path of obedience without depending on Christ, anymore than a lame man can take a step without his crutches

Again, Christ has more trouble with us on this point than perhaps any other. It is easy for him to support us if he could persuade us to depend upon him. He can easily guide us if we will keep hold of his hand. He can easily carry our burdens if we will suffer him to do so. He can work in and for us all that we need with infinite ease, if we will but trust in him and surrender up our mind to his influence. In short, the greatest practical difficulty in the Christian religion, lies in the right understanding and belief of the doctrine of our dependence upon Christ. I say a right understanding and belief, because to believe this in one sense and in a particular form, is Antinomianism: to understand and believe it in another sense, is sheer legality. Legality rests in Christ as an atoning sacrifice, but not as an indwelling, upholding, all-sustaining, and controlling Spirit. It receives an outward but not an inward Christ--a Christ in heaven, but not a Christ in the heart; a Mediator between God and man, an Advocate on high, but not a present sanctification in the soul. It is receiving him in the latter sense which constitutes the right belief of our dependence upon Christ. Indeed, he must be received both as an atoning sacrifice--a risen, reigning, glorified Redeemer--a Mediator and Advocate with the Father; and also as an indwelling, sanctifying, constantly operating, upholding, guiding, renovating Spirit. He must be received by the mind's own faith, to dwell in the inward sanctuary of our own being, there to exert a constant sustaining and sanctifying influence, to work in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

Unbelief as it respects this doctrine, in the form in which I now state it, is the occasion of all our failures and of all our sins. It is a want of apprehending this doctrine, and of thoroughly embracing it that leaves so many souls in bondage to worry and flounder along in the state described in the seventh chapter to the Romans, without ever finding their way to the experience of the eighth chapter.

REMARKS.

1. As I have already intimated, many hold this doctrine in theory, who never realize or practically believe it.
2. To this class of persons, this doctrine is a fatal stumbling-block. Holding as a theory the doctrine of their dependence on Christ, and yet not actually depending on him, inevitably leaves them in sin; for their theory prevents their making any effort to help themselves, and their unbelief prevents their casting themselves upon Christ, so that they settle down into Antinomianism, in the form so generally witnessed among professors of religion. They make their dependence their excuse for not obeying God; whereas, did they really believe this doctrine of dependence, and actually cast themselves on him, they would do their duty. Now this class of persons are laboring under a great delusion. They suppose they truly believe the doctrine of their dependence upon Christ, whereas, they only hold it as a soul-crippling, God-dishonoring theory, and therefore it is to them a most fatal stumbling-block.

Again, the real belief of it as a gospel fact, will secure a real as opposed to a theoretical dependence upon Christ. If a man believes his dependence upon Christ because the Bible asserts it; if he believes it as a truth of the gospel and a revealed fact, he will of course believe farther than this, that in Christ, and with the help of Christ, he can do all things required of him. The Apostle Paul says, that of himself he was

unable even to think any thing as of himself; but adds in another place, "I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me." Now it is very manifest, that if the doctrine of dependence is embraced as a truth of revelation, the other fact will also be embraced as alike revealed; viz: That we can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth us. The belief of this will of course secure obedience to Christ.

From what has been said, we may learn what the true doctrine of natural ability is, namely, that every moral agent is really able to do whatever God requires of him; that when God requires us to believe in Christ he gives us so much light as renders us able to believe; that when he requires us to repent, he gives us so much light that we are able to repent; but that we are not able to work out that which is good by virtue of possessing the powers of a moral being, independently of divine light.

Again, we may see what is meant by the assertion that Christ is the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. Every moral agent, in just so far as he is a moral agent, is enlightened by Christ.

Again, it is of very little use to speculate about the philosophy of divine influence in the soul, or the manner in which Christ upholds and sustains us. The fact is the thing to be believed, and although I have myself speculated much, and often very much to my own injury, upon the mode of divine influence, still I am convinced that to lay hold of the fact without concerning ourselves to understand the mode of divine operation is the great thing to be attained to.

Again, we need to settle it as a fact of as much stability as the fact of our own existence, that we shall and can do nothing if the divine support is withdrawn; and yet that it is always so proffered to us that we are perfectly responsible for every duty enjoined in the scriptures.

Again, it is of the last importance that we understand what it is to depend constantly on Christ. Now we can acknowledge our dependence without depending. I can hold in theory and in fact that I am dependent, without being willing to be dependent; without the act of depending, without casting myself upon Christ, and settling down upon him. Now depending is an act of the will or heart. It is, as I have said, a holding on to Christ. It is an ever active state of mind. It is a cleaving to him, and is as really an act of the mind as it is to hold on to the hand of a fellow-being. The child upon the precipice who holds onto my hand, must hold his mind in a state of dependence, or he cannot hold on to my hand. Did his mind let go of me, the muscles of his arm would instantly relax, and he would let go of my hand. Now a depending and holding on to Christ, is as really an active state of the will as if we used our hand to hold on to him. This needs to be understood, and a want of properly understanding this is the reason why persons do not abide in Christ. "If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit." Now to abide in Christ, is for the mind to cleave to him, to depend on him not as an outward and distant Savior or atoning sacrifice, but as a present, inward, in-dwelling support, a help at hand, a God as near to me as I am to myself. This is the true idea of depending on Christ. Without this dependence we can do nothing; with it, we do all things. Brethren, think of this?

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