

Dishonesty in Small Matters Inconsistent With Honesty in Anything

by Charles Finney

Dishonesty in small matters is a sign of a lack of principle and a willingness to take advantage when possible, and is not necessarily a precursor to greater dishonesty.

Scripture: Proverbs 11:1, Proverbs 20:23, Matthew 5:37, Luke 16:10, Colossians 3:23

Topics: "Honesty", "Integrity"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that dishonesty in small matters reflects a lack of true integrity in all aspects of life, arguing that one who is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. He explains that real honesty stems from a heart governed by love for God and neighbor, and that those who appear honest in larger matters may be motivated by selfishness rather than true principle. Finney illustrates this principle through various examples, showing that small acts of dishonesty reveal the true state of a person's heart and character. He warns that neglecting integrity in minor dealings can lead to a broader moral decay, ultimately undermining one's witness for Christ. The sermon calls for a commitment to honesty in all things, big and small, to reflect genuine faith.

Transcript

TEXT.--"He that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much."--LUKE xvi. 10.

THESE words are a part of the parable of the unjust steward, or rather, a principle which our Lord lays down in connection with the parable. The words do not require that I should go into an explanation of the parable itself, as they make no part of the story which the Lord Jesus was relating. The principle involved or laid down, is what I have to do with to-night. In preaching from these words I design to illustrate the principle laid down which is this:

ONE WHO IS DISHONEST IN SMALL MATTERS, IS NOT REALLY HONEST IN ANY THING.

The order which I shall pursue is the following:

I. I shall show what I do not mean by this principle.

II. Show what I do mean by it.

III. Prove the principle, that one who is dishonest in small matters is not really honest at all.

IV. Show by what principle those individuals are governed who, while they are dishonest in small things, appear to be honest, and even religious, in larger affairs.

V. Mention several instances where persons often manifest a want of principle in small matters.

I. I am to show what I do not mean by the principle, that one who is dishonest in small matters is not really honest in anything.

Answer. I do not mean that if a person is dishonest in small matters, and will take little advantages in dealing, it is therefore certain that in greater matters he will not deal openly and honorably according to the rules of business.

Or that it is certain, if a man will commit petty thefts and depredations, that he will commit highway robbery. There may be various reasons why a man who will commit such depredations will not go into more daring and outrageous crimes.

Or that if a man indulges unclean thoughts, it is certain he will commit adultery.

Or that if he indulges covetous desires, it is certain he will steal.

Or that if he indulges in ill-will towards any one, he will commit murder.

Or that if he would enslave a fellow man, and deprive him of instruction and of all the rights of man, he will certainly commit other crimes of equal enormity.

Or that if he will defraud the government in little things, such as postage, or duties on little articles, he will rob the treasury.

II. I am to explain what I do mean by the principle laid down, that if a man is dishonest in little things, he is not really honest in any thing.

What I mean is, that if a man is dishonest in small matters, it shows that he is not governed by principle in any thing. It is therefore certain that it is not real honesty of heart which leads him to act right in greater matters. He must have other motives than honesty of heart, if he appears to act honestly in larger things, while he acts dishonestly in small matters.

III. I am to prove the principle.

I am not going to take it for granted, although the Lord Jesus Christ expressly declares it. I design to mention several considerations in addition to the force of the text. I believe it is a general impression that a person may be honest in greater matters, and deserve the character of honesty, notwithstanding he is guilty of dishonesty in small matters.

1. If he was actuated by a supreme regard to the authority of God, and if this was the habitual state of his mind, such a state of mind would be quite as apt to manifest itself in smaller matters as in large. Nay, where the temptation is small, he would be more certain to act conscientiously than in greater matters, because there is less to induce him to act otherwise. What is honesty? If a man has no other motives for acting honestly than mere selfishness, the devil is as honest as he is; for I dare say he is honest with his

fellow devils, as far as it is for his interest or policy to be so. Is that honesty? Certainly not. And, therefore, if a man does not act honestly from higher motives than this, he is not honest at all, and if he appears to be honest in certain important matters, he has other motives than a regard to the honor of God.

2. It is certain that, if an individual is dishonest in small matters, he is not actuated by love to God. If he was actuated by love to God, he would feel that dishonesty in small matters is just as inconsistent as in great. It is as real a violation of the law of God, and one who truly loves God would no more act dishonestly in one than in the other.

3. It is certain that he is not actuated by real love to his neighbor, such as the law of God requires. If he loved his neighbor as himself, he would not defraud him in small things any more than in great. Nay, he might do it in great things, where the temptation to swerve from his integrity was powerful. But where the temptation is small, it cannot be that one who truly loves his neighbor would act dishonestly. See the case of Job. Job truly loved God, and you see how far he went, and what distress he endured, before he would say a word that even seemed disparaging or complaining of God. And when the temptation was overwhelming, and he could see no reason why he should be so afflicted, and his distress became intolerable, and his soul was all in darkness, and his wife set in and told him to curse God and die, he would not do it then, but said, "Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What! shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" Do you suppose Job would have swerved from his integrity in little things, or for small temptations? Never. He loved God. And if you find a man who truly loves his neighbor, you will not see him deceiving or defrauding his neighbor for trifling temptations.

IV. I am to examine some of the motives by which a person may be actuated, who is dishonest in little things, while he may appear to be honest in greater matters.

Our business here is to ascertain how this apparent discrepancy can consist with the declaration in the text. The Lord Jesus Christ has laid down the principle, that if a man is dishonest in small matters, he is not strictly honest at all. Now, here are facts, which to many appear to contradict this. We see many men that in small matters exhibit a great want of principle, and appear to be quite void of principle, while in larger things they appear to be honorable and even pious. This must be consistent, or Jesus Christ has affirmed a falsehood. That it is consistent with truth will be admitted, if we can show that their conduct in regard to larger matters can be accounted for on other principles than honesty of heart. If we can account for it on principles of mere selfishness, it will be admitted, that where a man is dishonest in small things, he is not really honest at all, however honestly he may act in regard to larger matters.

1. They may act honestly in larger matters for fear of disgrace.

They may know that certain small things are not likely to be mentioned in public, or to have a noise made about them, and so they may do such things, while the fear of disgrace deters them from doing the same things in regard to larger matters, because it will make a noise. What is this but one form of selfishness overbalancing another form? It is selfishness still, not honesty.

2. He may suppose it will injure his business, if he is guilty of dishonesty with men of business, and so he deals honestly in important matters, while in little things he is ready to take any advantage he can, that will not injure his business. Thus a man will take advantage of a seamstress, and pay her a few cents less than he knows it is really worth for making a garment, while the same individual, in buying a bale of goods, would not think of showing a disposition to cheat, because it would injure his business. In dealing with an abused and humble individual, he can gripe and screw out a few cents without fear of public disgrace,

while he would not for any consideration do an act which would be publicly spoken of as disreputable and base.

3. Fear of human law may influence a man to act honestly in such things as are likely to be taken up, while in such small matters as the law is not likely to notice, he will defraud or take advantage.

4. The love of praise influences many to act honestly and honorably, and even piously, in matters that are likely to be noticed. Many a man will defraud a poor person out of a few cents in the price of labor, and then, in some great matter on public occasion, appear to act with great liberality. What is the reason, that individuals who habitually screw down their servants, seamstresses, and other poor people that they employ, to the lowest penny, and take all the advantage they can of such people, will then, if a severe winter comes, send out cart loads of fuel to the poor, or give hundreds of dollars to the committees? You see that it is for the love of praise, and not the love of God nor the love of man.

5. The fear of God. He may be afraid of the divine wrath, if he commits dishonest acts of importance, while he supposes God will overlook little things, and not notice it if he is dishonest in such small matters.

6. He may restrain his dishonest propensities from mere self-righteousness, and act honestly in great things for the sake of bolstering up his own good opinion of himself, while in little things he will cheat and play the knave.

I said in the beginning, that I did not mean, that if a man would take advantages, he would certainly never act with apparent uprightness. It often comes to pass, that individuals who act with great meanness and dishonesty in small affairs, will act uprightly and honorably, on the ground that their character and interest are at stake. Many a man who among merchants is looked upon as an honorable dealer, is well known, by those who are more intimately acquainted with him, to be mean and knavish and overreaching in small matters, or in his dealings with more humble and more dependent individuals. It is plain that it is not real honesty of heart, which makes him act with apparent honesty in his more public transactions.

So I said, that if an individual will commit petty thefts, it is not certain he would commit highway robbery. He might have various reasons for abstaining, without having a particle too much honesty to rob on the highway, or to cut a purse out of your pocket in the crowd. The individual may not have courage enough to break out in highway robbery, or not skill enough, or nerve enough, or he may be afraid of the law, or afraid of disgrace, or other reasons.

An individual may indulge unclean thoughts, habitually, and yet never actually commit adultery. He may be restrained by fear, or want of opportunity, and not by principle. If he indulges unclean thoughts, he would certainly act uncleanly, if it were not for other reasons than purity of principle.

An individual may manifest a covetous spirit, and yet not steal. But he has the spirit that would lead him to steal, if not restrained by other reasons than honesty or principle.

A man may be angry, and yet his anger never break out in murder. But his hatred would lead him to do it, so far as principle is concerned. And if it is not done, it is for other reasons than true principle.

An individual may oppress his fellow man, enslave him, deprive him of instruction, and compel him to labor without compensation, for his own benefit, and yet not commit murder, or go to Africa to engage in the slave trade, because it would endanger his reputation or his life. But if he will do that which divests life of all that is desirable to gratify his own pride or promote his own interest, it cannot be principle, either of love

to God or love to man, that keeps him from going any length, if his interest requires it. If a man, from regard to his own selfish interest, will take a course towards any human being which will deprive him of all that renders life desirable, it is easy to see that, so far as principle is concerned, there is nothing in the way of his doing it by violence on the coast of Africa, or taking life itself, when his interest requires it.

So an individual who will defraud the United States' treasury of eighteen cents in postage, has none too much principle to rob the treasury, if he had the same prospect of impunity. The same principle that allowed him to do the one, would allow him to do the other. And the same motive that led him to do the one, would lead him to do the other if he had an opportunity, and if it were not counteracted by some other motive equally selfish.

A man may, in like manner, be guilty of little misrepresentations, who would not dare to tell a downright LIE. Yet if he is guilty of coloring the truth, and misrepresenting facts, with a design to deceive, or to make facts appear otherwise than they really are, he is really lying, and the individual who will do this would manufacture ever so many lies, if it was for his interest, or were he not restrained by other reasons than a sacred regard to truth.

V. I will mention some instances, where persons are dishonest in small matters, while they appear to act honestly and even piously in regard to matters of greater importance.

1. We often find individuals manifesting a great want of principle in regard to the payment of small debts, while they are extremely careful and punctual in the payment of notes in the bank, and in all their commercial transactions.

For instance, there is a man takes a newspaper, the price is only a small sum, and the publisher cannot send a collector to every individual, so this man lets his subscription lie along perhaps for years, and perhaps never pays it. The same individual, if it had been a note at the bank, would have been punctual enough; and no pains would have been spared, rather than let the note run beyond the day. Why? Because, if he does not pay his note in the bank, it will be protested, and his credit will be injured, but the little debt of twenty shillings or five dollars will not be protested, and he knows it, and so he lets it go by, and the publisher has to be at the trouble and expense of sending for it, or go without his money. How manifest it is that this man does not pay his notes at the bank from honesty of principle, but purely from a regard to his own credit and interest.

2. I have before referred to the case of seamstresses. Suppose an individual employs women to sew for him, and for the sake of underselling others in the same trade, he beats down these women below the just price of such work. It is manifest that the individual is not honest in any thing. If, for the sake of making more profits, or of underselling, he will beat down these women--suppose he is honorable and prompt in his public transactions--no thanks to him, it is not because he is honest in his heart, but because it is his interest to seem so.

3. Some manifest this want of principle by committing little petty thefts. If they live at a boarding house, where there are boarders, they will commit petty thefts, perhaps, for fuel in the cellar. An individual will not be at the expense of getting a little charcoal for himself, to kindle his fire in the morning, but gets along by pilfering from the stores laid in by others, a handful at a time. Now the individual that will do that, shows himself to be radically rotten at heart.

A case once came to my knowledge, of this kind. An individual was sitting in a room, where the gentleman had on the table for some purpose a tumbler of wine and a pitcher of water. The gentleman had occasion to go out of the room a moment, but accidentally left the door a-jar, and while he was out, looking back he saw this individual drink part of the wine in the tumbler, and then to conceal it, fill up the tumbler with water, and take his seat. Now, the individual who did that showed that he loved wine, and that he was none too good to steal, he showed that so far as principle was concerned, he would get drunk if he had the means, and steal if he had a chance; in fact, at heart, he was both a drunkard and a thief.

4. Individuals often manifest great dishonesty when they find articles that have been lost, especially articles of small value. One will find a penknife, perhaps, or a pencil case, and never make the least inquiry, even among those he has reason to believe were the losers. Now, the man that would find a penknife, and keep it without making inquiry, where there was any prospect of finding the owner, so far as principle is concerned, would keep a pocket-book full of bank notes, if he should find it and have an equal chance of concealment. And yet this same individual, if he should find a pocket book with five thousand dollars in it, would advertise it in the newspapers, and make a great noise, and profess to be wonderfully honest. But what is his motive? He knows that the five thousand dollars will be inquired after, and if he is discovered to have concealed it, he shall be ruined. Fine honesty, this!

5. Many individuals conceal little mistakes that are made in their favor, in reckoning, or in giving change. If an individual would keep still, say nothing, and let it pass, when such a mistake is made in his favor, it is manifest that nothing but a want of opportunity and impunity would prevent him from taking any advantage whatever, or overreaching to any extent.

6. Frauds on the Post Office are of the same class.

Who does not know that there is a great deal of dishonesty practiced here. Some seem to think there is no dishonesty in cheating the government out of a little postage. Postmasters will frank letters that they have no right to. Many will frank letters not only for their families but for their neighbors, all directly contrary to law, and a fraud upon the Post Office. The man that will do that is not honest. What would not such a man do, if he had the same prospect of impunity in other frauds, that he has in this?

7. Smuggling is a common form of petty dishonesty. How many a man will contrive to smuggle little articles in his trunk, when he comes home from England, that he knows ought to pay duty to the custom house, and he thinks but little of it, because the sum is so small, whereas, the smaller the sum, the more clearly the principle is developed. Because the temptation is so small, it shows how weak is the man's principle of honesty, that can be overcome by such a trifle. The man that would do this, if he had the same opportunity, would smuggle a cargo. If, for so little, he will lose sight of his integrity, and do a dishonest act, he is not too good to rob the treasury.

REMARKS.

1. The real state of a man's heart is often more manifested in smaller matters than in business of greater moment.

Men are often deceived here, and think their being honest in greater things will go to prove their honesty of heart, notwithstanding their knavishness in smaller things, and so they are sure to be on their guard in great things, while they are careless of little matters, and so act out their true character. They overlook the fact, that all their honesty in larger matters springs from a wrong principle, from a desire to appear honest,

and not from a determination to be honest. They overlook their own petty frauds because they guard their more public manifestations of character, and then take it for granted that they are honest, while they are nothing but rotten at heart. The man who will take advantage in little things, where he is not watched, is not actuated by principle. If you want to know your real character, watch your hearts, and see how your principles develop themselves in little things.

For instance, suppose you are an eye-servant. You are employed in the service of another, and you do not mind being idle at times, for a short time, in the absence of your employer. Or you slight your work when not under the eye of your employer, as you would if he was present. The man who will do this is totally dishonest, and not to be trusted in any thing, and very likely would take money from his employer's pocket book, if it were not for the fear of detection, or some other equally selfish motive. Such a person is not to be trusted at all, except in circumstances where it is his interest to be honest.

Mechanics that slight their work when it will not be seen or known by their employer, are rotten at heart, and not to be trusted at all, any farther than you can make it for their interest to be honest.

Persons who will knowingly misstate facts in conversation, would bear false witness in court under oath, if favored with opportunity and impunity. They never tell the truth at all because it is truth, or from the love of truth. Let no such man be trusted.

Those who are unchaste in conversation would be unchaste in conduct, if they had opportunity and impunity.--Spurn the man or woman who will be impure in speech, even among their own sex, they have no principle at all, and are not to be trusted on the ground of their principles. If persons are chaste from principle, they will no more indulge in unclean conversation than unclean actions. They will abhor even the garment spotted with the flesh.

2. The individual who will indulge in any one sin, does not abstain from any sin because it is sin.

If he hated sin, and was opposed to sin because it is sin, he would no more indulge in one sin than another. If a person goes to pick and choose among sins, avoiding some, and practicing others, it is certain that it is not because he regards the authority of God, or hates sin, that he abstains from any sin whatever.

3. Those individuals who will not abandon all intoxicating drinks for the purpose of promoting temperance, never gave up ardent spirits for the sake of promoting temperance.

It is manifest that they gave up ardent spirits from some other consideration than a regard to the temperance cause. If that had been their object, they would give up alcohol in all its forms, and when they find that there is alcohol in wine and beer and cider, they would give them up of course. Why not?

4. The man who, for the sake of gain, will sell rum, or intoxicating drinks, to his neighbor, and put a cup to his neighbor's mouth, and would thus consent to ruin him, soul and body, would consent to sell his neighbor into slavery to promote his own selfish interests, if he could do it with impunity. And if he did not rob and murder him for the sake of his money, it certainly would not be because the love of God or of man restrained him. If the love of self is so strong, that he will consent to do his neighbor the direct injury of selling him ardent spirits, nothing but selfishness under some other form, prevailing over the love of money, could prevent his selling men into slavery, robbing, or murdering them, to get their money. He might love his own reputation; he might fear the penalty of human law; he might fear the destruction of his

own soul, so much as to restrain him from these acts of outrage and violence. But certainly it could not be the principle of love to God or man that would restrain him.

5. The individual who will enslave his fellow men for his own selfish objects, would enslave others, any or all, if his interest demanded, and if he had the same opportunity.

If a man will appropriate the rights of one, he would appropriate the rights of all men, if he could do it with impunity. The individual who will deprive a black man of his liberty, and enslave him, would make no scruple to enslave a white man, if circumstances were equally favorable. The man who contends that the black laborer of the south ought to be held in slavery, if he dared, would contend to have the white laborers of the north enslaved, and would urge the same kind of arguments, that the peace and order of society requires it, and laborers are so much better off when they have a master to take care of them. The famous Bible argument too, is as good in favor of white slaves as blacks, if you only had the power to carry it out. The man who holds his fellow man as property, would take his fellow man as property, if he could with impunity. The principle is the same in all. It is not principle that keeps men who holds slaves from kidnapping on the coast of Africa, or from making war to enslave the free laborers of the north.

6. The man that will not practice self-denial in little things to promote religion, would not endure persecution for the sake of promoting religion.

Those who will not deny their appetite would not endure the scourge and the stake. Perhaps, if persecution were to arise, some might endure it for the sake of the applause it would bring, or to show their spirit, and to face opposition. There is a natural spirit of obstinacy, which is often roused by opposition, that would go to the stake rather than yield a point. But it is easily seen, that it is not true love to the cause which prompts a man to endure opposition, if he will not endure self-denial in little things for the sake of the cause.

7. Little circumstances often discover the state of the heart.

The individual that we find delinquent in small matters, we of course infer would be much more so in larger affairs, if circumstances were equally favorable.

Where you find persons wearing little ornaments from vanity, set them down as rotten at heart. If they could, they would go all lengths in display, if they were not restrained by some other considerations than a regard to the authority of God and the honor of religion. You may see this every day in the streets. Men walking with their cloaks very carefully thrown over their shoulders so as to show the velvet, and women with their feathers tossing in the air--it is astonishing how many ways there are in which these little things show their pride and rottenness of heart.

You say these are little things. I know they are little things, and because they are little things, I mention them. It is because they are little things, that they show the character so clearly. If their pride was not deeply rooted, they would not show it in little things. If a man had it put in his power to live in a palace, with every thing corresponding, it would be no wonder if he should give way to the temptation. But when his vanity shows itself in little things, he gives full evidence that it has possession of his soul.

How important it is for you to see this, and to keep a watch over these little things, so as to see what you are, and to know your characters, as they appear in the sight of God.

How important to cultivate the strictest integrity, such as will carry itself out in small things as well as in large. There is something so beautiful, when you see an individual acting in little things with the same careful and conscientious uprightness as in matter of the greatest moment. Until professors of religion will cultivate this universal honesty, they will always be a reproach to religion.

Oh, how much would be gained, if professors of religion would evince that entire purity and honesty on all occasions and to all persons, and do what is just right, so as to commend religion to the ungodly. How often do sinners fix their eye on some petty delinquencies of professors of religion, and look with amazement at such things in persons who profess the fear of God. What an everlasting reproach to religion, that so many of its professors are guilty of these little, mean, paltry knaveries. The wicked have cause enough to see, that such professors cannot have any principle of honesty, and that such religion as they exhibit is good for nothing, and is not worth having.

Of what use is it for that woman to talk to her impenitent servant about religion, when her servant knows that she will not hesitate to overreach and screw down and cheat in petty things? Or for that merchant to talk to his clerks, who know that however honorable he may be in his greater and more public transactions, he is mean and knavish in little things? It is worse than useless.

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