

Eternal Life

by Charles Finney

Eternal life is a gift from God that can be received by faith, and it consists in salvation from sin and perfect and eternal holiness.

Scripture: Matthew 1:21, John 1:29, John 3:16-17, John 6:33, John 11:25, Ephesians 2:1, Ephesians 3:17, Colossians 3:4, Hebrews 2:9, 1 John 5:10-11

Topics: "Eternal Life", "Faith and Unbelief"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that eternal life is not merely existence or happiness, but a profound state of holiness and salvation from sin, which is found in Jesus Christ. He explains that this gift of eternal life is offered to all humanity, regardless of their belief, and can be accepted through faith or rejected through unbelief. Finney asserts that those who believe in the Son of God possess an inner witness of their eternal life, which is a conscious experience of holiness and love. He urges listeners to recognize their dependence on Christ for spiritual life and to accept the gift of eternal life without delay. The sermon concludes with a call to embrace this divine inheritance and the serious consequences of rejecting it.

Transcript

Text.--I John 5:10, 11: "He that believeth on the Son of God, hath the witness in himself; he that believeth not God, hath made him a liar, Because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.["]

In discoursing upon this subject, the following is the order in which I intend to direct your thoughts:

I. SHOW WHAT WE ARE TO UNDERSTAND BY ETERNAL LIFE.

II. THAT JESUS CHRIST IS THE ETERNAL LIFE OF THE SOUL.

III. THAT GOD HAS GIVEN ETERNAL LIFE TO ALL MANKIND, ENTIRELY IRRESPECTIVE OF THEIR KNOWLEDGE OR CONSENT.

IV. THAT THIS GIFT MAY BE REJECTED BY UNBELIEF, OR RECEIVED BY FAITH.

V. WHOSOEVER BELIEVES ON THE SON OF GOD, OR RECEIVES THIS GIFT, HAS THE WITNESS IN HIMSELF, OR KNOWS THAT HE HAS ETERNAL LIFE BY HIS OWN CONSCIOUSNESS.

I. I am to show what we are to understand by eternal life.

1. Not merely eternal existence. This is implied in eternal life, but does not constitute it. Death, as used in the scriptures, or in common language, does not mean annihilation. Nor does life mean mere existence.

2. Not merely exemption from eternal death or punishment. This, also, is implied in, but does not constitute eternal life.

3. Not merely eternal happiness. All these are implied, and included in eternal life, but are not the principal thing intended by it.

4. But this life is the contrast, or opposite of that death in "trespasses and sins," in which mankind are said to be, by nature. Life is the opposite of death. If we can, therefore, understand what the Scriptures mean by death, as applied to the mind, we can ascertain what that life is which is brought to light in the gospel. Death, as applied to the mind, in the scriptures, is a state of entire sinfulness--of total depravity, and alienation from God. Eph. 2:1, the Apostle addressing those who had been converted, says; "And you HATH HE QUICKENED, who were dead in trespasses and sins." And in the fifth verse again, he says: "Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved.)" In Col. 2:13, he says, "And you being dead in your sins, and in the uncircumcision of your flesh hath he quickened, together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses." And in Eph. 4:14, he says, "Wherefore he saith, awake thou, that sleepest, and rise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." These, and other similar passages, show what is meant by the death which is the contrast of that life, which in the text, is said to be given in Christ. This life includes exemption from eternal punishment, together with eternal happiness. But the great and leading thing implied, is salvation from sin, or perfect and eternal holiness. Hence it is said in the very beginning of the gospel, Matt. 1:21, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." And he is everywhere in the gospel represented as a Savior from sin.

II. I am to show that Jesus Christ is the eternal life of the soul.

1. This is shown by the text.

2. By John 11:25: "Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the LIFE, he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he LIVE." This text establishes the same point. In Col. 3:4, it is directly asserted, "When Christ, who is our LIFE, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." In 1 John 1:1 he is called the "Word of LIFE." And in [1] John 5:12, it is said, "He that hath the Son, hath LIFE, and he that hath not the Son, hath not LIFE." That he is the eternal life of the soul, is evident from John 5:40; "And ye will not come to me that ye might have LIFE." And also from John 6:33, and onward, "For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth LIFE unto the world." "Then said they unto him, Lord evermore give us this bread."--"And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of LIFE; he that cometh to me, shall never hunger, and he that believeth in me shall never thirst." Again, in the 48th verse and onward, he says, "I am that bread of LIFE." "Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead." "This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die." "I am the LIVING bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall LIVE forever, and the bread that I will give him is my flesh, that I will give for the LIFE of the world."

"The Jews, therefore, strove among themselves, saying, how can this man give us his flesh to eat?" "Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his

blood, ye have no LIFE in you.[]--"Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, HATH ETERNAL LIFE; and I will raise him up at the last day." "For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him."

"As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father, so he that eateth me, even he shall LIVE by me." "This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead; he that eateth of this bread shall LIVE for ever."

At these words His disciples murmured, saying, verse 60 and onward, "This is an hard saying, who can hear it?" "When Jesus knew in himself, that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you?" "What, and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?"

"It is the Spirit that QUICKENETH; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are LIFE." His disciples supposed Him to speak of His material body, and blood--but in these verses he informs them that it was His divine nature which came down from heaven, and that constituted the bread and blood of which He spake, and of which, if they ate and drank, they should have eternal life. I need not multiply passages of scripture. You who read your Bibles, know that Christ is everywhere represented as "the resurrection and the LIFE," as "the way, the truth, and the LIFE," as "the bread and water of eternal LIFE," as the "fountain of LIVING waters," and in a vast variety of ways, this truth is taught throughout the Scripture.

III. I am to show that God has given eternal life to all mankind, entirely irrespective of their knowledge or consent.

By this, I do not mean that they have received, or are actually put in possession of eternal life, or if they remain in unbelief, that they ever will be put in possession of it, but that an act is passed conferring on them pardon, and eternal life. In proof that this gift must be irrespective of our believing it, I remark, that whatever is to be believed, must be true, independent of our belief. If the truth of a proposition depended upon our believing it, then we should be under the necessity of believing it before it was true, which would be an absurdity. Every truth of the gospel which is an object of faith, is true, whether we believe it or not. Were it not so, we could not be required to believe it. It must, therefore, be true that God has given eternal life to all who are under any obligation to believe the gospel. The text represents the unbeliever as making God a liar, "because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son." "And this is the record that God hath given to us eternal LIFE, and this life is in his Son." Now, is the unbeliever to believe that God has given to others, eternal life, and exclude himself, or is he to believe himself to be included in the gift of eternal life. If by us, he is to include himself with the rest of mankind, then it must be true that eternal life was given him before he believed or received it. Did the gift belong only to those that believe, and that, too, after they believe? How, then, should our unbelief make God a liar? This gift must extend to all for whom Christ died. In John 1:29, he is called the "Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." In John 3:16,17, it is said, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." In John 4:42, he is again called the "Saviour of the world." In John 6:33, he is represented as "giving life to the world," and in the 51st verse, the same fact is declared, "and the bread which I will give, is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world." In Heb. 2:9, it is said, "We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that he, by the grace of God, should taste death for EVERY man." These, and many other passages that might be quoted, show that this gift respects all mankind.

IV. I am to show that this gift may be rejected by unbelief, or received by faith.

The gift is absolute, without any other conditions than those necessarily implied in the bequest. If I give a man anything, the condition is always implied, that he receive it. The gift on my part is absolute, and the condition, if not expressed, is always implied in the very nature of the case. A father may make a will, and bequeath his estate to an heir; but in this bequest, this condition is implied, that he receive it. The gift is an absolute gift, which may be received or rejected, at the pleasure of the heir.

Now, faith is a necessary condition of the Gospel. It is naturally impossible that an unbelieving mind should accept, or receive the gift of eternal life. The gift is holiness. Holiness is love and active obedience. Unbelief is distrust. Faith is trust or confidence--that confidence of the heart that works by love. Faith is the yielding up the soul to the influence and truth of Christ. And thus Christ is represented as being our sanctification. Not our sanctifier, as if he made us holy in ourselves, and left us to obey, in the exercise of our uninfluenced and unaided powers.

When he is said to be our life--"our sanctification," the "bread of life," --the "vine of which we are branches"--I suppose these, and such like expressions, all mean the same thing, viz: that Christ is the perpetual author of all our holy feelings and actions. Faith is that act of the mind that submits to the control of Christ and of the truth. It is the receiving of Christ as an indwelling Savior--it is that opening of the door of the heart spoken of in the Scripture, and receiving Christ as an indwelling and reigning king.

Thus in Eph. 3:17, Christ is represented as "dwelling in the heart by faith," and in many other passages, he is represented as dwelling in the heart, and faith is represented as the door by which he enters. It is, as I have already said, the voluntary receiving of the divine influence of Christ, and of his truth into the mind. It is the yielding of our voluntary powers to his divine control. Hence he is represented as dwelling in us--which I suppose to be really and literally true--that by his Spirit he is personally present with the mind, and by his truth and persuasive influences, controlling, guiding, and directing it.

Now distrust or unbelief rejects his teaching--refuses to receive, and be guided, and molded by truth; while faith receiving the divine communication, surrenders the will, and all the powers to his entire control. So that he is our sanctification, i.e. he does not change our nature, so that we become good in ourselves--so that we have life in ourselves, apart from him. But as it is said in Colossians, "Our life is hid with Christ in God, and when he who is our life shall appear, then shall we also appear with him in glory."

He is the life, or the holiness of the soul; it is his presence and agency that produces holiness in us; and this holiness continues no longer, and extends no farther, than the divine agency that produces it. By this, I do not mean that we are passive in holiness, or that we receive his holiness or righteousness by imputation; but that we actually become partakers of his holiness, and of his life, by the voluntary surrender of our powers to his control. Nor by controlling our powers, do I mean that our own agency is, in any sense, suspended.

Our own agency is never more freely and fully exercised, than when under the divine influence of Christ. His influences are moral, i.e. persuasive only, else they could not be received by faith. It were absurd to speak of receiving a physical or compulsory influence by faith. Nor, in the nature of the case, can eternal life, although absolutely given, and left at the option of every man, be received in any other way, than by simple faith. This gift is entirely irrespective of works of any kind on our own part. Nor do works of law, or any other kind of works, bring us any nearer the reception of it. Faith alone receives it. Unbelief alone rejects it.

V. I am to show that, whosoever believes on the Son of God, or receives this gift, has the witness within HIMSELF, or knows that he has eternal life by his own consciousness.

This is expressly affirmed in the text. And I might quote various other passages to the same effect--but would observe, that as eternal life consists in holiness, it must be a subject of consciousness. Holiness is supreme love. Now of what can we be conscious, if not of the supreme affection of the mind? Is it possible that any of you should love God supremely, and not be conscious of it? Many persons hope that they love God, and hope that they have eternal life; but if they would consider that eternal life is holiness, and that nothing short of supreme love is holiness, they would know at once that if any man believes, he has the witness in himself--the testimony of his own consciousness, which is the highest and best possible evidence. Now if any of you have not this evidence, the witness of your own consciousness, I beg of you to put away your hope and your talk about eternal life. For what is a life worth which is not a matter of consciousness?

REMARKS.

1. From what has been said, every one of you must know whether you have eternal life. Can you say with Paul "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me?" "And the life which I now live, I live by faith on the Son of God?" Do you know that you live in love, and walk in love?

2. You who do not believe, and thus receive eternal life, are making God a liar. How horrible it would sound were the language of your unbelief put into words?[!]

3. You see, from this subject the great mistake of those who suppose if persons were wholly sanctified they would have no further need of Christ. You who think thus, overlook the fact that Christ is the eternal life of the soul. The difference between those who are wholly, and those who are partially sanctified, is, that the former are made to feel, continually, their entire dependence upon God--that "in him they live, and move, and have their being" that without him they are absolutely dead in "trespasses and sins"--that every spiritual breath they breathe, and pulse they tell, is from his influence. They know they have not, and never expect to have any life but in him, any more than the vine has life when severed from the branch. Constant faith receives the tide of eternal life as it flows continually from Christ; in other words, it receives a continual influence, and the constant leadings and guidings of the Spirit of Christ. Whereas, they that are but partially sanctified, have so illy learned their dependence, as sometimes to look to Christ, and at other times to turn away and depend upon the exercise of their own unaided powers.

4. If God has given to us eternal life, why should we not enter into, and take possession of it? The gift is absolute; our elder brother, the Lord Jesus Christ, has it in possession, and holds it as a trustee, or surety, or guardian, and invites and continually urges us to accept it. And why, with such an inheritance as this, should we go about like swine, and wallow in the filth of sin, instead of at once entering upon our inheritance, and taking hold of the fulness of gospel salvation? Take hold, at once. Christ, your elder brother, has in possession, this eternal life. Believe in him--believe now, at once, without any preparatory process whatever. Believe the record "that God hath given to us, eternal life, and this life is in his Son," and you shall now enter into the rest of faith.

5. From this subject, you see also the infinite guilt of those who reject the gospel. The gift is absolute--it is tendered to their acceptance, with all the sincerity of God--it was purchased by the blood, and treasured up in the life of Christ. There is an infinite excellence, and power, and glory in it--and if "he that despised Moses' law, died without mercy, under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose

ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing."

6. Lastly. Let it be remembered, understood, realized and felt by every one of you, that this bequest is made. The testator has died and sealed it with his blood. The infinite treasure--the pearl of great price lies before you, waiting for your acceptance. Take it--receive it--hold fast to it by faith.

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