

# Exposing Your Inner Self

by Charles Finney

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*To truly understand our character and feelings, we must examine ourselves by fixing our minds on reality and engaging in action.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:136, Psalm 119:158, Matthew 23:30-35, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 13:5, Philippians 4:8, James 1:22, 1 John 1:8-10

**Topics:** "Self-Examination", "True Character in Christ"

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## Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of self-examination for Christians to understand their true moral character in the eyes of God. He argues that uncertainty about one's spiritual state leads to a lack of peace and that individuals must actively engage with their faith to discern their standing as either saints or sinners. Finney warns against the dangers of self-deception and the importance of focusing on God and His standards to gain clarity about one's feelings towards sin and salvation. He encourages believers to take action in their faith rather than waiting for feelings to come, asserting that true emotions arise from engaging with the realities of faith and the world around them.

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## Transcript

"Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves" --2 Corinthians 13:5

We must understand our own hearts and take the proper steps to prove our real characters as they appear to God. Scripture doesn't refer to a trial or proof of our strength or knowledge but our moral character. It implies that we should know how God regards us and what He thinks of us. Does He consider us saints or sinners? We must settle the question definitively for ourselves: Are we heirs of heaven or heirs of hell?

The individual who is uncertain about his real character can have no peace of mind. He may have apathy, but apathy is different from peace. And very few professing Christians, or people who continue to hear the gospel, can have apathy for any length of time or suppress uneasy feelings. I am not speaking of hypocrites, who have seared their consciences. But in regard to others, it is true that they must settle this question in order to enjoy peace of mind.

ANXIETY IS NO VIRTUE

A man who is not truly settled in his mind about his own character is hardly honest. If he professes Christ when he does not honestly believe he is a saint, he is half a hypocrite. When he prays, he always doubts whether his prayers are acceptable to God.

Some people maintain that keeping saints in the dark makes them humble. But one of the most weighty considerations in the universe to keep a believer from dishonoring God is to know that he is a child of God. When a person is in an anxious state of mind, he can have little faith, and his usefulness cannot be extensive until the question is settled.

Many think the question of salvation never can be settled in this world. They make a virtue of their great doubt, which they always have, even if they are Christians. For hundreds of years believers have been looked upon with suspicion unless they were filled with doubts. But I maintain that Christians can test themselves to know their own selves and understand their true character. This is evident from the command in the text, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves." Does God require us to examine and prove ourselves when He knows it is impossible for us to learn our true character?

Consciousness gives the highest possible certainty about the facts that determine our characters. We can and ought to have the same kind of evidence of our state before God that we have of our existence; and that is consciousness. We cannot help having the evidence. Consciousness continually testifies to our state of mind. We only need to notice what consciousness testifies to, and we can settle the question as certainly as we can our own existence.

If men were shut up in dungeons with no opportunity of being influenced by circumstances, they could not be blamed for not knowing themselves. But God has placed them in circumstances to prove them and know what is in their hearts--to know whether they will keep His commandments or not. The things around us produce impressions on our minds and lead us to feel and act in some way. When we see how we feel and how we are inclined to act in particular circumstances, it produces self-knowledge.

God's law is a true standard by which to try our character. We know exactly what His standard is; and, therefore, we have an infallible and invariable rule by which to judge ourselves. We can bring all our feelings and actions and compare them with this standard and know exactly what their true character is in the sight of God. God Himself tries them by the same standard.

#### WHEN PRIDE BLINDS

Nothing but dishonesty can possibly lead us to self-deception. The self-deceived individual is not only careless and negligent but dishonest, or he would not deceive himself. He must be greatly prejudiced by pride and blinded by self-will, or he would have to know that he is not what he professes to be. Many various circumstances call forth the exercises of his mind, and it must be willful blindness. If he never had any opportunities to act, or if circumstances did not call forth his feelings, he might be ignorant. A person who had never seen a beggar might not be able to tell what he thought about beggars. But put him with beggars every day, and he is either blind or dishonest if he doesn't know how he feels about them.

Many wait for evidence to come to them to decide whether they are Christians or not. They appear to be waiting for certain feelings to come to them. Perhaps they pray earnestly about it and then wait for the feelings to come that will let them know they're saved. Many times they won't do anything until they get this evidence. They sit and wait in vain expectation for the Spirit of God to come and lift them out of the

stupor. They may wait until doomsday.

The human mind is so constituted that it will never feel by trying to feel. You can try hard to feel in a particular way. Your efforts to put forth feelings are unphilosophical and absurd. Feeling is always awakened in the mind by the mind's being intensely fixed on some object calculated to awaken feeling. But when the mind is fixed, not upon the object but on direct attempts to put forth feeling, this will not awaken feeling. It is impossible. You may as well shut your eyes and try to see.

When the mind's attention is taken up with looking inward and attempting to examine the nature of the present emotion, that emotion at once ceases to exist; the attention is no longer fixed on the object that causes the emotion. When I hold my hand before a lamp, it casts a shadow; but if I take the lamp away, there is no shadow. If the mind is turned away from the object that awakens emotion, the emotion ceases to exist. The mind must be fixed on the object, not on the emotion, or there will be no emotion and no evidence.

You will never get evidence by spending time in mourning over the state of your heart. Some people spend their time complaining, "Oh, I don't feel; I can't feel; my heart is so hard." What are they doing? Perhaps they are trying to work themselves up into feeling. This is as philosophical as trying to fly!

While they are mourning and thinking about their hard hearts, they are the ridicule of the devil. Suppose a man shut himself outside and then went around complaining how cold he was--children would laugh at him. He would freeze if he shut himself out from the warmth. And all his complaining would not help the matter.

When we concentrate on any object calculated to awaken feeling, it is impossible not to feel. The mind is made so that it must feel. Don't stop and ask, "Do I feel?" If you put your hand near fire, do you need to stop and ask "Do I really feel the sensation of warmth?" You know that you do!

Where the impression is slight, it requires an effort of attention to notice your own consciousness. The passing feeling of the mind may be so slight that it escapes your notice, but it is still real.

## THE HORROR OF SIN

If the mind is fixed on an object calculated to excite emotions of any kind., it is impossible not to feel those emotions to some degree. If the mind is intently fixed, it is impossible not to feel the emotions to such a degree that you are conscious of them. These principles show you how we are to discover our characters and know the real state of our feelings toward any object.

Be sure that the things you fix your mind on are realities. A great deal of imaginary religion prevails in the world. People have high feelings--their minds are much excited and the feeling corresponds with the object contemplated. But here is the source of the delusion--the object is imaginary. The feeling is not false or imaginary. It is real feeling and corresponds perfectly with the imaginary object. But the object is fiction. The individual has formed a notion of God, of Jesus Christ, or of salvation that is opposite to the truth. His feelings are correct, but his object is wrong. This is undoubtedly a major source of the false hopes and conversions in the world.

You will not discover the true state of your heart merely by finding in your mind a strong feeling of abhorrence for sin. All intelligent beings disapprove of sin, when viewed abstractly and detached from their own selfish gratification. Even the devil feels it. The devil no more loves sin, when viewed abstractly, than

Gabriel. He blames sinners and condemns their conduct; and whenever he has no selfish reason for being pleased at what they do, he abhors it.

A striking difference exists between the natural disapproval of sin, as an abstract thing, and the intense detestation and opposition that is founded on love to God. It is one thing for a young man to feel that a certain act is wrong and quite another thing to view it as an injury to his father. Here is something in addition to his former feelings. He has not only indignation against the act as wrong, but his love for his father produces a feeling of grief. And the individual who loves God feels not only a strong loathing for sin but a feeling of grief and indignation when he views it as committed against God.

If, then, you want to know how you feel toward sin, consider how you feel when you hang around sinner and see them break God's law. When you hear them swear profanely or see them get drunk, how do you feel? Do you feel as the psalmist did when he wrote, "I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved; because they kept not thy word"? And, "Rivers of water run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law." And again, "Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law" (Psalm 119:158, 136, 53).

Look back on your past sins and see whether you feel as an affectionate child would feel when he remembers how he has disobeyed or dishonored a beloved parent. It is one thing to feel a strong conviction that your former conduct was wicked--and quite another thing to have this feeling attended with grief because you sinned against God.

Most Christians look back on their former conduct toward their parents with deep emotion. In addition to a strong disapproval of their conduct, a deep emotion of grief often overwhelms them accompanied by gushing tears. This is true repentance toward a parent. And repentance toward God is the same thing. If genuine, it will correspond in degree to the intensity of attention with which the mind is fixed on the subject.

## EXAMINE YOURSELF

If you want to test your feelings toward impenitent sinners, then converse with them about the state of their souls and warn them. See what they say and discover the state of their hearts, and then you will know how you feel about sinners. Don't shut yourself up in your closet and try to imagine them. You may imagine something that will affect your sympathies and make you weak and pray.

Fix your thoughts intently on God. Don't try to imagine a God after your own foolish hearts, but take the Bible and learn who God is. Don't imagine how He looks, but fix your mind on the Bible description of how He feels, what He does, and what He says. Here you will detect the real state of your heart, which you cannot mistake.

You are bound to know whether you love the Lord Jesus Christ or not. Review the circumstances of His life and see whether they appear as realities to your mind--His miracles, sufferings, character, death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession at the right hand of the throne of God. Do you believe all these? What are your feelings in view of them? When you think of His willingness and ability to save, His atoning death, and His power, are these things realities to you? If so, you will have feelings and will be conscious of them.

What are your feelings toward the saints? If you want to test your heart on this point, don't let your thoughts run to the ends of the earth, but fix your mind on the saints near you. Do you love them and desire their holiness? Can you bear them in your heart to the throne of grace in faith and ask God to bestow blessings on them?

What is the state of your feelings toward revivals? Read about them, think of them, fix your mind on them, and you will have feelings that will manifest the state of your heart. The same is true of the unsaved, of drunkards, of the Bible, or any object of concern. The only way to know the state of your heart is to fix your mind on the reality of things until you feel so intensely that there is no mistaking the nature of your feelings.

If you find it difficult to produce feelings about any of these things, either your mind is taken up with the Lord's work and won't allow fixed attention to the specified object, or your thoughts wander with a fool's eye to the ends of the earth. I have known some Christians to be very distressed because they did not feel as intensely as they think they ought to on some subjects. A person's mind may be so taken up with anxiety, labor, and prayer for sinners that it requires an effort to think enough about his own soul to feel deeply. When he hits his knees to pray about his own sins, a sinner comes to mind; and he can hardly pray for himself. Don't regard it as evidence against you if the reason you don't feel is because your mind is engrossed in something equally important.

If your thoughts run all over the world and you don't feel deeply enough to know your true character--if your mind won't come to the Bible and fix on any object of Christian feeling--lay a strong hand on yourself and fix your thoughts with a death-grasp until you do feel. You can command your thoughts: God has put the control of your mind in your own hands. You can control your own feelings by turning your attention upon the object you wish to feel about. Fasten your mind on the subject until the deep foundations of feeling break up on your mind and you understand the state of your heart and your real character in the sight of God.

## THE RELIGION OF IMAGINATION

An individual can never know the true state of his heart unless he is active in the Church. Shut up in his prayer closet, he can never tell how he feels toward objects that are outside, and he can never feel right toward them until he goes out and acts. How can he know his real feeling toward sinners if he never brings his mind in contact with sinners? His imagination may make him feel, but his feelings are not produced by a reality.

Individuals shut out from the world of reality and living in worlds of imagination become perfect creatures of imagination. A similar thing happens in Christianity with those who don't bring their mind in contact with reality. They think they love mankind yet do them no good. They imagine they abhor sin but do nothing to destroy it. How many people deceive themselves by exciting their imagination about missions but do nothing to save souls? Women will spend a whole day at a prayer meeting for the conversion of the world, while their impenitent servant in the kitchen is not spoken to all day.

This is all a fiction of the imagination! There is no reality in such "Christianity." If they loved God and man, the pictures drawn by the imagination about the unsaved in other countries would not create any more feeling than the reality around them.

They are surrounded by sinners, and they hear profane oaths and see vices as a naked reality every day. If these produce no feeling, it is vain to pretend that they feel what God feels for sinners in foreign lands or anywhere.

People love to talk about the heathen, but they have never converted a soul at home. If they don't promote revivals at home, where they understand the language and have direct access to their neighbors, how can they be depended upon to promote the work of Jesus on the mission field? The Church must understand this and keep it in mind in selecting men to go on foreign missions. They ought to know that if the reality at home doesn't excite a person to action, the devil will only laugh at a million such missionaries.

The same delusion often manifests itself in regard to revivals. An individual may be a great friend to revivals, but they are always the revivals of former days or revivals that are yet to come. But as to any present revival, he is always aloof and doubtful. He can read about revivals and pray, "O Lord, revive thy work; O Lord, let us have such revivals when thousand shall be converted in a day."

But get him into the reality of things, and he never sees a revival he can take interest in. He is friendly to the fictitious imaginings of his own mind and can create a state of things that will excite his feelings. But no reality ever brings him out to cooperate in actually promoting a revival.

In the days of our Savior, the people said, and no doubt really believed, that they abhorred the actions of those who persecuted the prophets. They said, "If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets" (Matthew 23:30). No doubt they wondered that people could be so wicked. But they had never seen a prophet and were moved by their imagination.

When Jesus appeared, the greatest of prophets, on whom all the prophecies centered, they rejected Him and put Him to death with as much cold-hearted cruelty as their fathers killed the prophets. "Fill ye up," said our Savior, "the measure of your fathers. . . . That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth" (Matthew 23:32,35).

In every age men have fallen in love with fictions of their own imaginations, over which they have stumbled into hell.

## ILLUMINATING THE PAST

Christianity consists in love, feeling right, doing right, and doing good. If, therefore, you want to be holy, do not think of cultivating holiness that will

never cause it to grow--that is, by withdrawing from contact with mankind. If the Lord thought such circumstances would be favorable to piety, He would have directed them so. But He knew better. He has, therefore, appointed circumstances as they are so that His people may have a thousand objects of benevolence and a thousand opportunities to do good. If they deny themselves and turn their hearts upon these things, they cannot fail to grow in holiness and have increasing evidence.

We can consistently shut ourselves up on our prayer closets in only one department of self examination: that is when we want to look back and calmly examine the motive of our past conduct. In such cases we must limit our thoughts and keep other things from our mind. To do this effectually, it is often necessary to resort to seclusion, fasting, and prayer.

Sometimes it is impossible to vividly remember what we want to examine without association. We attempt to call up past scenes, but everything is confused and dark until we strike upon some associated idea that gradually brings the whole before us.

If I am called as a witness in court, I can sometimes only remember by going to the place. Then all the circumstances come back as though they were yesterday. Similarly, we may find that associated ideas will bring back the feelings we formerly had.

In examining yourselves, be careful to avoid expecting to find all the Christian graces in exercise in your mind at once. This is contrary to the nature of the mind. If you find the exercises of your mind are right, satisfy yourselves with the subject before your mind. Don't draw a wrong inference because some other right emotion isn't present. The mind can have only one train of emotions at a time.

Some Christians always have the happy kind of feelings. Others always feel sad and distressed. They are in almost constant agony for sinners. Their thoughts are directed to different objects. One class always thinks of objects calculated to make them happy; the other thinks of the state of the Church or the state of sinners. They are weighed down with a burden as if they had a mountain on their shoulders. Both may be Christians and both classes of feelings may be right, depending upon the objects they look at.

The apostle Paul had continual heaviness and sorrow of heart on account of his brethren. No doubt he felt right. The case of his brethren, who had rejected the Savior, was the object of his thoughts. The dreadful wrath that they had brought upon themselves and the doom that hung over them was constantly before his mind. How could he be anything but sad?

Show me a joyful, happy Christian, and he is not generally a very useful Christian. Often, he is taken up with enjoying the sweets of religion and does little. Some ministers preach a great deal on these subjects and make their hearers very happy. But such ministers are seldom instrumental in converting many sinners, however much they may have refreshed, edified, and gratified their congregation.

On the other hand, you will find men who are habitually filled with deep agony of soul in view of the state of sinners, and these men will be largely instrumental in converting men. The reason is plain. Both preached the truth, both preached the gospel--in different proportions--and the feelings awakened corresponded with the views they preached. The difference is that one comforted the saints and the other converted sinners.

**DO SOMETHING!**

Christians who are always happy are lovely companions, but they are very seldom engaged in pulling sinners out of the fire. Others are always full of agony for sinner, looking at their state and longing to have souls converted. Instead of enjoying the foretaste of heaven on earth, they are sympathizing with the Son of God when He was on earth, groaning in spirit and spending all night in prayer. The real revival spirit is a spirit of agonizing desires and prayer for sinners.

People often wonder why they feel as they do. The answer is plain. You feel so because you think so. You direct your attention to those objects calculated to produce those feelings.

Many pious people dishonor the Lord by their doubts. They perpetually talk about their doubts and conclude that they have no faith. If, instead of dwelling on their doubts, they will fix their minds on others objects--on Jesus for instance--or go out and try to bring sinners to repentance, they will feel right and

dissipate their doubts.

Never wait until you feel right before you do this. Perhaps some things that I have said have not been rightly understood. I said you could do nothing for God unless you felt right. Don't infer that you are to sit still and do nothing until you are satisfied that you do feel right.

Place yourself in circumstances that will make you feel right and go to work. On one hand, to bustle about without any feeling is wrong; and on the other hand, to shut yourself up on your closet and wait for feeling to come is also wrong!

Stay active! You will never feel right otherwise. Keep your mind under the influence of objects calculated to create and keep Christian feelings alive.

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