

God's Commandments Not Grievous

by Charles Finney

God's commandments are not grievous because they require only what is reasonable and in harmony with our moral nature.

Scripture: Matthew 11:30, Romans 8:1, 1 John 5:3

Topics: "God's Commandments", "Grace and Obedience"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that God's commandments are not burdensome, arguing that they align with our moral nature and are designed for our highest good. He explains that commandments become grievous only when they are impossible, unreasonable, or partial, while God's laws require only what is reasonable and attainable. Finney reassures that God's expectations are not capricious but are rooted in love, aiming to guide us towards true happiness and fulfillment. He encourages believers to embrace God's commandments as liberating rather than oppressive, highlighting the importance of receiving the Holy Spirit to aid in obedience. Ultimately, Finney calls for a recognition of the simplicity and accessibility of God's requirements, urging individuals to trust in His grace.

Transcript

"His commandments are not grievous." 1st. John 5:3

The commandments here spoken of are God's. The whole verse reads--"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not grievous." It is elsewhere said, we may know we love God because we love his children. Here the order is reversed;--"we know we love the children of God when we love God and keep his commandments." Both statements are true. If we truly and rightly love men we shall love God also; and if God, then we shall love his children too.

"Grievous," in our text means oppressive, heavy to be borne; yet not heavy in the physical, but in the moral, sense.

I. And here in the outset we must enquire when a commandment may be said to be grievous, and how we may know whether it is truly so regarded or not. What are those qualities and relations which constitute a commandment really grievous? Have we any certain test, any sure means of knowing?

We have. God has given us a moral nature by which we may judge, and by which indeed we cannot but judge. Indeed, God requires us to judge by the decisions of this very nature, a requisition which assumes

that his written word imposes no precepts on us inconsistent with the moral nature he has given us. It should not be overlooked that God has given us two volumes of revelation, the one written; the other implanted in our constitution. It is safe therefore to assume that the precepts of the one cannot be in conflict with the unquestionable decisions of the other.

Upon this principle, we know,

(1.) That a commandment, impossible to be fulfilled, must be pronounced grievous. We cannot help pronouncing it so, let who ever will affirm the contrary.

(2.) The same is true of a commandment that is unreasonable, one which our moral sense affirms to be so.

A commandment may be unreasonable in many respects; e.g. if it be manifestly unnecessary; the result of capricious severity. If we say this, we should say, that the command is unreasonable, and therefore grievous.

Supposing we know beyond question that the commandments are unnecessary, then if they require great things under great and solemn penalties, they are a great grievance; if under infinite penalties, then they are infinitely grievous; if under light penalties, then they are a light grievance. If the things required are not important, and yet are enforced by grave and fearful penalties, the commands are clearly grievous. Every sane mind necessarily affirms this to be the case.

(3.) A partial commandment is grievous. If it requires different things of persons under the same circumstances; if it has respect of persons, we condemn it as grievous.

Again, if it were difficult to be obeyed, even by the well disposed, and great penalties were attached to disobedience; if under the best circumstances and with the utmost facilities, obedience were scarcely possible, and failure almost certain, this would be grievous.

Again, if we were required to secure any given end and the requisite means were not within our reach, and are not furnished us by the Power that makes the requisition; if we were required to make brick without straw, or to convert the world without the requisite agencies and powers, and the commands were enforced by heavy penalties, this must be regarded as greatly grievous.

Or, if the command were unadapted to our nature or opposed to our highest and best interests; or if the possibility of obeying it were precluded by our circumstances, or by our relations, and we are laid under the burden of heavy penalties to do these things, this would be truly grievous. We could not possibly regard it otherwise.

We should regard a commandment grievous if it required anything more than honest intention and best endeavor, inasmuch as whatever lies outside of and beyond this must be impossible to us. What we cannot do with the best intention and the utmost endeavor, we cannot do at all. This, therefore, would be grievous.

Or yet again, if the interests to be protected by law were of vast importance, and yet were protected by only a slight penalty, such a law might well be deemed grievous by those who had interests demanding protection. --You would regard it as a most grievous law which should propose to protect your life by a penalty of only 37 1/2 cents.

Or if a trifling end were set up, but a fearful penalty were attached, this also would be grievous.

II. When a commandment is not grievous.

It is not grievous merely because it conflicts with our unreasonable desires. If the desires are contrary to reason, it is not unreasonable that laws should cross them.

Law is not grievous because opposed to the selfishness of men. A precept may be perfectly, infinitely opposed to selfishness, and yet be far from being grievous.

It is not grievous because of its being opposed to our self-will. A self-will that is arbitrary and capricious is no standard by which to judge of law.

Law is not grievous when it merely opposes what conscience also opposes. If law does not conflict with a good and sound conscience, all is right, for conscience is the reason judging on moral subjects--the faculty constituted of God for this end. If conscience be for it, therefore, it cannot be grievous.

No law is grievous which requires only that which is for our highest good. This, our reason necessarily affirms.

If the object of the precept is to secure our own highest good, it cannot be regarded by us as grievous, for its spirit is altogether good.

Now do not say that in these statements I am dogmatizing. I am only affirming self-evident propositions. They need only a clear statement to appear to every mind self-evident.

If the law forbids nothing except what would be injurious to us, it is all right.

If it requires us to deny ourselves for the good of others, all is right, provided this self-denial will be for our own highest good. If it will be greater good to us than the sacrifice is an evil; if the self-denial, though real and great, gives us back more than an equivalent, the law which requires it is by no means grievous. Especially is this true if the self-denial not only gives us a greater good, but is an essential and only means of securing our highest good. By no means can this be deemed grievous, requiring of us a self-denial, of which the more we exercise, the greater good we secure.

A law is not grievous where it requires of us simple honesty--a regard to the rights of others, equal to our regard for our own. This cannot be grievous. This may be honest and right if it requires no more of us than we require of others conscientiously. Who can pronounce such a commandment to be grievous?

I shall proceed by and by to enquire whether God's commandments have these qualities and this character; but at present, I am discussing the subject only in its general and abstract form. So doing, we may perhaps better establish the principles that underlie the subject.

A command cannot be said to be grievous when it requires of us only the reasonable employment of all we have and are. For so much is reasonable, no matter what the particular service may be under the circumstances. It were a contradiction to say it is unreasonable to require a reasonable service of active powers, made for useful action, or of means of usefulness, put in our hands by our Creator.

That cannot be unreasonable or grievous which simply requires of us a right voluntary state. We know ourselves to have a free will,--the power to originate our own volitions. This is a thing of which we are

absolutely certain from our consciousness. We do not certainly know that we can move our own muscles. The law of connection between the will and the muscles is sometimes suspended. You might find it to be so in any effort you might make. But you know you can control your own will. You may try this at any time; and you will find it so. You also believe and assume it to be so, of everybody else, of sane and sound mind.

Now, therefore, if God's love requires of you only a right state of your will, and those acts and states which follow naturally from a right state of the will, no man can reasonably feel that this is grievous, or can honestly pronounce it to be so.

A commandment is not grievous when it requires nothing capricious, nothing unnecessary, nothing hard to the well-disposed; and threatens disobedience with only the proper penalties.

Again, it cannot be deemed grievous when we could not be satisfied if it required nothing less than it does; when we ourselves, in all honesty, are constrained to say, it is all right; but if anything less were required, or if its requisitions were enforced by a less penalty, we should say--it is wrong. Especially if we are aware that any other course than that indicated in the precept would be hard or even ruinous--hard in the sense in which sin is hard, and ruinous in the sense in which sin is ruinous.

Again, if it requires us to do nothing for which help is not provided--all the help requisite in the case--this is not grievous. If it tenders to us all the appropriate instrumentalities necessary to make us practically obedient, we cannot regard it as grievous.

Nor again, when it is easily understood by the well disposed. If the law were above our reach, as the ancient king nailed his on a pillar too high to read,--you might complain; but since the law is made so plain that he who runs may read it, you cannot regard it as grievous. Especially you cannot so regard it, since the will is taken for the deed, and it is always accepted if there be a winning mind and a good intention. E.g. suppose the command be to convert the world. You set yourself to do it. You live for this purpose. You honestly intend to do all you can for this end. You fail only because, having exhausted your powers, the work has proved too great for your strength. Very well; you shall have your reward, as if you had succeeded and done all. What! say you, is the will taken for the deed? Yes; when the whole heart is in it and you do your utmost. --Ah, said that missionary, as he returned with ruined health and blighted hopes, "I have failed! my mission purpose and endeavors have been a failure!" Perhaps not. You have been to Africa, and are driven back by the climate. Very well, you have obeyed the command and you shall not fail of your reward.

III. I am next to consider in special the commandments of God, to see whether they can rightly be deemed grievous.

1. Negatively, as to what they are not and do not require.

Not one of them requires anything above the use of our own powers, and nothing which goes beyond the dictates and approval of our own reason. The precepts of the law and of the gospel are identical in spirit and in general character, neither requiring of us anything more than we can do, nor anything not in harmony with our reason.

God's law does not require us to undo anything we have done that is wrong--in the season of putting it back to its position before being done. This might be, and usually would be, impossible. God only requires

us to undo our present wrong purposes and states of mind; the wrong deeds of the past. He has provided a way to forgive; the present wrong of our heart he makes our concern.

He does not require us to make satisfaction for the wrong done, either by atonement, or by making up for the wrong we have done.

He does not require us to save ourselves and secure the salvation of our own souls, without his aid and grace. He neither requires or expects that we shall save anybody else by our own wisdom or efforts. He knows this is naturally impossible.

He does not ask us to work out a legal righteousness for the future. He does not make perfect obedience to law the condition of our salvation. This, if required, would be grievous, inasmuch as we have entirely broken the law and forfeited all hope in that direction.

Nor does He require us to fulfil the law in the future without reference to his grace, and without his aid, presented in the gospel. Nor does he demand that we shall bear our own burdens, overcome our temptations, and fight our spiritual battles--without his grace, guidance and strength. He does not expect us to be our own guide, to find our own way, and to create our own success.

Again, God requires nothing that will in the least mar our own happiness, or interfere with our true interests. Nothing inconsistent with our highest progress in true improvement; nothing that naturally retards our rapid advancement in all that is good.

He does not require us to love him above our ability.

The law specifies--"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind and with all thy strength." With whose mind--and whose strength? Only thine own. And with how much of this mind and strength? Only with all. Nothing more. It were simply absurd to say that this is impossible; and therefore it is impious to think or speak of it as grievous.

The law does not require us to regard and treat our Heavenly Father in any respect better than He deserves to be treated, and never better than we know He deserves, or than we affirm that we ought to treat him. When we can honestly and conscientiously be satisfied with ourselves as to our treatment of God, he will be satisfied. No one shall ever be able, honestly, to say--"I think Thou requirest me to obey and to love Thee more than Thou deservest to be obeyed and loved." There is nothing in either law or gospel which requires anything beyond the legitimate demands of our own reason. Nay more; the law appeals to him in its own vindication and makes his own conscience the rule. God appeals to every moral agent to judge for himself what is right. "Are not My ways equal, says He; are not your ways unequal?" "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who has trodden under foot the Son of God?" So throughout the Scripture God makes his appeal to man's own mind to judge for himself of the rectitude of the law imposed on him and of the equity of the threatened penalty. Who then should say that the spirit of his government is overbearing, capricious, unreasonable? Who can regard his commandments grievous?

Again, God never requires his interests to be estimated above their real value. Yet some think God to be very selfish, in requiring everybody to love him. But what less could He require? God does not ask you to love him more than he deserves to be loved; nor more than it is right you should love him. This love which God requires of you towards himself is good-willing, and it has intrinsically for its object the happiness of

sentient beings, and should be in proportion to the amount of being, so to speak, which each individual may have; or (which amounts to the same result) to the amount of happiness each is capable of enjoying. Now God's capacity for happiness is infinite and therefore is an end of infinite value and rightly claims the utmost good-willing of all created beings. When God asks you to love him supremely, he only asks you to love him in proportion to the importance of the object--on his own happiness. If his interests are supreme, why not accord to them your supreme regard?

But He requires of you also the love of complacency; a delight in his character as good. He asks that this should be supreme, and why should He not? Is He not infinitely worthy of your complacency and regard?

Yet further; God never requires us to regard any interest not known, or which we are not capable of knowing; nor does He ask us to regard any interest beyond its perceived or perceivable value. Thus universally, God measures his demands by our powers of obedience, love and service. He never requires us to do things we cannot reach and grasp; never, to treat him with any more confidence than He deserves, nor to love him when He is unworthy of our love, or at all beyond his worthiness.

God's requisitions upon us never go beyond our honest convictions of what they should be. He does not require things, the propriety of which is to our own minds questionable. He is never despotic, never tyrannical. His intelligent creatures are always under the conviction that God's will ought to be obeyed and ought to be the universal law. He requires of no creature of his in any world more obedience or love than his own intelligence sees and affirms to be right.

No one can rightly ask of us any more or other feelings than those which naturally result from right intentions and a right state of the will. The feelings, it should be considered, are involuntary and therefore are not directly controlled by the will; yet they are so related to the will that certain feelings naturally follow a right state of the will and certain other feelings, a wrong state. Hence moral responsibility truly attaches to the state of the will; and it is on this principle that God acts, declaring that "if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted."

In accordance with this, God never requires any other action or course of life except what naturally flows from right intention. Hence He lays his requisitions on the will or heart, requiring only that this be right and thus virtually requiring its natural results and out-flowings.

IV. What God's law does require.

An equitable state of mind; one that regards every known interest according to our judgment of its value. God requires us to regard the universal good of each being according to its perceived value. This is an equitable and right state of mind. It is a voluntary and a simple state of mind, a mere unit. Instead of being embarrassed with points of casuistry, it comes to you asking only that you give your heart to God and merge your will in homage to his because his is infinite reason. It simply requires you to regard all interests according to their perceived value. If your neighbors interests are equal to your own, regard them so; if less, regard them less; if greater, regard them more. God never requires any being to sacrifice his own interest for a less valuable interest of another. Hence, when He requires of us universal benevolence, this does not demand that we love others and not ourselves--God and not ourselves; but only each, according to its value. Hence this law never drops from regard our own interest, but most effectually secures it.

This Christian, virtuous, life, is the natural and certain result of the state of mind which drops selfishness, and puts self and all other interests in their proper places. You have only to maintain that state of mind and

abide in it; then your acts and state will meet the entire demands of the law.

Let us now look into the gospel. This requires the same as the law, and something more. It comes, in most inviting and impressive form, to win us back to the love and obedience which the law enjoins. Its special requisition for this end is that we receive the Holy Ghost as the condition and means of practical obedience and a practical realization of the great result of holiness in heart and life. Man needs such an influence; therefore God provides it. Whatever else did or did not occur at the fall of man in Eden, it is plain that the Holy Ghost was grieved. Man tore himself away from his God and from communion with him, so that God no longer dwelt within him. But now God is seeking to restore that state of communion and fellowship. He now returns to man in the person of his Spirit, and asks of the sinner to open his heart and make this Heavenly agent welcome.

I need not here speak of the case of those who know not the gospel, only to say that all such are plainly under the law only, and not under the gospel. They have the work of the law written in their heart; and by this light they stand or fall. But of us, who have the gospel, God requires that we should receive the Holy Ghost. Some will say--is not this unreasonable? No; for the Holy Ghost is not far away in some remote quarter of the universe where you cannot reach him, but is present, and needs only be made welcome and he will take up his abode with you. He comes in connection with his word, to teach, enforce and impress it; and the thing for you to do is to yield yourself to the conviction of the truth, thus revealed. To yield to truth, is to yield to God. When the Bible shows you that you ought to believe and trust God, then to do this is to yield to the Spirit of God and to welcome his presence to your heart. When you know that you ought to give up your sins, then to yield to this conviction is to consent to the claims of his Spirit and to receive it to your soul. Else you resist the Holy Ghost. He does not expect you to rise of yourself and without his aid from the state of death in which you are plunged, but requires you to receive the Holy Ghost, and continually, to yield to every conviction of duty. By presentation of the truth, He draws; you are to yield; He constrains; you acquiesce. He requires you to be led and filled with the Spirit; to lean on him and to avail yourself of his help. He bids you obey his perfect law; and by this divine agency, offered through the Spirit, He provides all requisite aid and strength for this purpose. This provision is both full and free. If it were otherwise, you might find or feel it hard to be required to be filled with the Holy Ghost. If you must needs ascend into heaven to bring him down, or descend into the deep to bring him up, this might be grievous. But only to receive a present and offered Spirit;--how can you think this hard? Jesus comes to restore and reinstate you in holiness and love; does he require you to do all this unaided? He neither expects nor requires it. He tenders to you his advocacy; proposes to advocate your cause without cost. Are you rich? Give to your suffering fellow men and please God therein; Are you poor? He requires of you only according to what you have.

He does not require you to live an anxious distracted life, bearing all your own burdens alone, but has permitted you to be "without carefulness," casting all your care upon him. He gives you the fullest permission to let the peace of God rule in your heart; and is this a hard thing? Is this state of mind a hard and grievous one? Jesus said--"My peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you." The men of the world give sparingly, grudgingly; they give to-day and take back to-morrow; but not so does Christ give to his friends. --Is this grievous?

He says--"Rejoice always." Many seem to think religion only fit for sick-beds and funeral occasions, and they say,--"What have we to do with a religion so gloomy? Must we forego all our enjoyments? How grievous that would be!" But how mistaken are all such notions of religion! The "righteous should make their boast in him and be glad." In his salvation, let them "exceedingly rejoice." God invites them to look up

to him hopefully, never desponding, much less despairing. If He had required you to rejoice in worldly pleasure and be happy in the good things of earth, this were indeed a hard saying and a grievous commandment.

But I have heard some of you say--"God wants nothing to do with me; He has utterly cast me off; How then can I believe and trust in Him? I have abused Him too long.["] Mark; God asks of you no such feelings, no such thoughts. On the contrary He only asks you to take him at his word and welcome to your soul a full salvation. He gives you the full consolation of believing. Is this grievous?

He requires you to embrace every dispensation with a kiss; to believe that all things shall work together for your good; and so believing, to rejoice in all your afflictions and tribulations.

Of you, sinner, He requires that you should come to-day and bring all your load of guilt to him. Come, however deeply conscious of much past sin;--come and hold your soul under the flowing stream of his redeeming blood. And is this hard? Is this too bad? Is it too bad that he should forgive so freely and tender you the waters of life without money or price? He does not require you to hear a great many sermons or make a great many impenitent prayers.

But you say--"Lord, if I were a Christian, I would come at once to thee; but now, I must certainly make myself better before I come." "No," says your Savior; "come now. Make no delay; offer no excuses for refusal." "Can I come, you say, without his help?" Is he not helping you even now? Suppose I should sit sullenly down and refuse to move, when everything is ready and nothing wanting but the action of my own will? Suppose I should then plead that I lacked the power and that I must wait! What nonsense!

Now He offers you his hand and asks you to take hold of it with your own. There must be a reciprocal taking hold of hands, the Spirit's agency working together with your own. The hand of your faith must take hold of the hand let down from heaven to you. And is this hard or grievous?

REMARKS.

What could God have required less than He does?--Nothing. What could He have required which would be more easy? I appeal to every sinner in this house; Can you think of any thing more easy, more feasible, more available? Of course you cannot think of his saving you in your sins. This would be no salvation. Do you complain that Christ's commands are grievous? In what one particular could He have done better?

You know that Christ has always done as much as He could for your salvation. Can you suggest a better, or more available system? Can you devise anything better than for you to take hold of his strength? He gives you the entire influence of his example, the utmost virtue of his blood and of his dying love;--can you think of anything more favorable?

Let me ask these young women, Can you think of anything better? Has He made salvation less easy than he might? Did you ever tell him so? Do you say--"Why did He not over-rule my freedom?" If he had, He could not have saved you any how. Could he have done anything more that would have been of service towards your salvation? Has He refused to make any sacrifices that if made, would have done you good? Did he avoid the cross? Did he shun the shame? Did he stay in heaven and bask in its bliss? Oh No! He came down; he flew to your relief; although he saw how many groans and how much blood it would cost him.

Have you thought of any expression of love which he has not made? Of any words of tenderness and forbearance he should have uttered, but did not? Have you acquainted yourself with what he has said? Is it said guardedly? Is the fulfillment uncertain? What is wanting?

How wicked in you if you complain! What have you to complain of? He has done the best he could; and have you any right to complain of that? How wicked to regard and treat his service and his gospel as if it were a hard thing!

A young woman said to me, "I am trying to become a Christian." What does that mean? Real honest trying implies the full consent of the will, and that is all that God requires. This consent is, being converted. People commonly deceive themselves when they talk thus about trying.

How great a mistake, to suppose that we cannot obey God. If our circumstances and nature were such that we absolutely could not obey him, it would indeed be very grievous for him to require it. But how can it be difficult now, since the thing he requires is only right willing? To say that a moral agent tries to will right and yet cannot is a downright absurdity. Nobody ever tried to will right and found it hard. This would be a contradiction in terms.

Inasmuch as the Spirit of God is freely given to us, it must be easy and not hard for us to get it. The command therefore to "be filled with the Spirit" is by no means grievous.

Only those complain of its being difficult to obey the law who would fain do it without accepting the help offered in the gospel. With the heart all wrong, they try to render an external obedience. This is always a hard up-hill business.

Without being at all aware of it many are trying to get along without Christ. Their effort is to make themselves good enough by dint of resolutions and efforts of their own, made quite in their own strength. Such persons, of course, will find it hard to be religious.

In a little different mode, some try to get grace by works of love. They want to come to Christ, but in order to get Christ, they try to work up a certain state of feeling and perform some legal works. All this is quite aside from the simplicity of gospel faith.

In like manner many try to get the Spirit without yielding to his present teachings. Overlooking and disobeying these, they wait for more light and pray for more of the Holy Spirit, while they refuse to obey what they have.

In fact, such persons fail to use a present offered Savior; do not realize how near, and how free, and how rich, are his gifts, nor how truly they are available--that they may as truly have and use the strength of Christ as they can use the strength of their own muscles. You may hear them crying and shouting aloud for the Holy Ghost, as if he were as far off as the fixed stars, not aware that he is really within them, trying to bring them to take hold of his present help. Such people make religion a hard and grievous matter. They do not understand its great simplicity and its ineffable richness and adaptation to human want.

Those who refuse to take Christ at his word will find it hard to get religion. You will hear them saying--

"Reason I hear, her counsels weigh,

And all I hear I approve;

but still I find it hard t'obey,

And harder still to love."

Is that your experience? If so, then you do not believe one word of Christ's promises. You have failed to reach the simplicity of gospel faith. While Christ is trying by every means to woo and to wed your heart to himself, and lets down an almighty arm to rescue and save you, what reception does he meet with! Each Sabbath evening in this place, we meet persons who think it one of the hardest things in the world to become Christians; who say--"I am trying to find Christ, but I must conclude he is not to be found. I cannot come to him." Are not all these conceptions of Christ unkind to him? Are they not false, injurious to Christ?

The great mass of professors of religion take ground directly opposed to our text. Whereas the inspired word declares--"His commandments are not grievous," they represent God's service as very hard and full of grief. Reason; they are in legal bondage, and have never broken out into the glorious liberty of the children of God. Let me ask these sinners, have you not received the impression from what you have heard Christians say, that it is a very difficult thing to get religion and that its service is so hard and God's law so high, it requires an angel's heart to keep it? Whereas the truth is, God requires nothing in anywise unreasonable. It is easier to be well-disposed than ill-disposed. How then can you say, it is easier to rebel than to obey? O sinner, all such notions are utterly false. His commandments are not grievous.

Look at that young man who says--"If I become a Christian I shall be compelled to preach the gospel, and O, what dull work and poor pay!" Does he forget that they who "turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars forever and ever?" Is this too hard?

But he says--"I must be a missionary and go to Africa; be sick there and die an early death." Well; "he that will lose his life for My sake, the same shall save it."

"But I am not eloquent." Oh, not eloquent! Can you not stammer out the gospel story? If it were really in your heart filling all your soul with its rich experience, could you not give some utterance to its glorious yet simple message? Beware of ambition! If you could be the first preacher in all the land--the most eloquent and the most applauded, that would do! Oh, that unholy ambition! You make your religion insufferably hard if you try to serve both God and your own ambition!

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