

God's Goodness Toward Men Basely Requited

by Charles Finney

God's goodness is manifested in various ways, but men often requite him evil for good due to their selfishness and opposition to his government.

Scripture: Psalm 109:5, Isaiah 53:3-5, Lamentations 3:22-23, Matthew 11:28-30, John 3:16, Romans 2:4, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Hebrews 12:6, James 1:17, 1 John 4:19

Topics: "God's Goodness", "Human Ingenuity"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes God's goodness towards humanity, illustrating how people often respond with ingratitude and evil in return for His love and kindness. He reflects on the nature of God's justice and mercy, explaining that while God is infinitely benevolent, He also requires justice, especially in a world filled with sin. Finney urges listeners to recognize the manifestations of God's love, such as creation, the law, and the gift of the Sabbath, and to receive these gifts with gratitude rather than resentment. He challenges the audience to consider their own responses to God's goodness and to repent for their ingratitude, ultimately pointing to Jesus Christ as the embodiment of God's love despite humanity's rejection. The sermon calls for a heartfelt acknowledgment of God's kindness and a sincere return to Him in faith and obedience.

Transcript

"They have rewarded me evil for my good and hatred for my love"--Ps. 109:5.

David is here speaking apparently of himself, yet really says much that is properly applicable to the Messiah. This is common to those ancient prophets who were, in a sort, types of the Messiah, and is especially developed in the case of David, who, as God's chosen king of his covenant people, was so extraordinary a precursor and model of Zion's greater King.

In one aspect, this and several other kindred passages, have been a stumbling-block to some, and a trial to many. They are thought to breathe a vindictive spirit. But there is really in them no occasion for stumbling, for, justly interpreted, they contain nothing inconsistent with the revealed character of God--nothing repugnant to the genius and spirit of the New Testament. These objections grow out of ignorance of God.

God is benevolent. But benevolence has many attributes, and justice is one of them. When occasion calls for it, justice must be revealed. The occasions are less frequent now than they will be at some future

day--because this is a period of probation, of long-suffering and of mercy. Under the gospel, and during the progress of this great experiment of mercy on depraved hearts, we need not expect the ordinary manifestations of justice, that must obtain, in general, under God's government.

It should never be forgotten that God is not all mercy. If he were to become so, he could be no longer good. Indeed, it is impossible for us to conceive of a being all mercy and no justice, or all justice and no mercy.

In this psalm, the special manifestations are those of justice. We hear the writer pleading for justice. The Spirit of Christ within the Psalmist is praying God to execute justice on the wicked. Of course the spirit which indited prayer in David's mind, was well aware of the necessity of justice in the government of God. Why, then, should he not direct David's mind to offer prayer accordingly? In the case of truly spiritual Christians, led by the Spirit of God, we see the same thing developed now. The soul demands the administration of justice. Under a deep conviction of its necessity as a means of the greatest good, strong desire is awakened, and this, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, assumes the spirit of prayer.

On all hands, it is conceded that God is good--perfectly, infinitely good;--in other words, is truly love. All unselfish, he is only and infinitely benevolent.

The text assumes that God does good to men, and affirms that they requite him evil therefor[e]. Let us now inquire,

I. In what God's goodness and love to men are manifested;

II. How these manifestations ought to be received;

III. How they are received in fact.

I. God manifested his love to man in creating him with a far nobler nature than he gave other animals. Man he made capable of knowing his Maker, and, in connection with this capability, made him capable, also, of loving and obeying him, and of entering into his sympathies and views in regard to the welfare of his creatures. These glorious prerogatives, conferred on man by his Maker, are surely manifestations of his great love, and should be so regarded.

Again, this love appears, also, in his establishing over man a government, such as he greatly needed for his welfare. Beyond all doubt, such beings as we are, need to be trained. Even in Eden, holy man needed God's watchful care to keep him from sin. Much more does he need God's care and help, since his fall. If our children need parental training to make them good men and women, much more do we, under God, our Father, to make us holy and happy. If this training is an act of benevolence in parents, much more is it in God.

Again, God's goodness to men appears in the fact that he writes his law in man's very nature, giving him a conscience whose voice responds to the voice of God. Surely, it was good in our Father to bring his law so very near as to write it in our inmost mind. For, if holiness is happiness, and hence, we must have God's law developed in all our moral being, then to give us a conscience on which this law should be written, is surely a development of real love.

Also, God reveals his love in giving man a written copy of this law. The case was that, by reason of sin, man did not like to retain God in his knowledge, and so, though he might have known, yet did not know

God fully and rightly. Then, that God should come down and spread out this law on the written page, was truly an act of love--love that would seek to vary the experiment in every way, and would use the best possible means for man's instruction and salvation.

And, yet further, after this law had been utterly broken, to open another door of hope through Jesus Christ--to throw it open so widely that none need fail of gaining admittance;--how significantly radiant with love is this!

But I have time only to glance at some of these things, passing unmentioned a great multitude of special developments. I might speak of his love in giving us a Sabbath. Suppose we were immersed in worldly business incessantly. What a calamity! Now we may return to God one day in seven--and, oh, what a rest and blessing is this! It is striking to observe how much of our time is Sabbath. The very child seven years old has had one whole year of Sabbaths, and the young man or woman twenty-eight years old, has had four full years of Sabbaths!--enough to go through college! O, if you had only used it to complete your education for the everlasting Sabbath!

Observe these Sabbaths are not a yoke, but a gift--made for man, to minister to his welfare--a holy day, to conduce the more to his holiness and happiness. How sad the mistake of those who never call the Sabbath a "delight," but only a "weariness!" Said a brother who had been sick--I had a new view of the Sabbath. I saw it to be a holiday, in which, like a weary laborer, I might go home and commune with my Father in heaven. I now thank God for Sabbaths!

God's goodness appears in all the means of grace he has appointed; in the blessings of his providence, also, in countless number and untold variety; in the restraints of his providence no less; in every thing God does for us and in regard for us. All the needful discipline, all the chastisements, rebukes, corrections--all come from a loving heart, designed in real wisdom for our highest good.

We might extend even this view, and add--the restraints of civil government, for, what would this world be without these restraints? The restraints of family government too; the means of education and the government necessary for their efficiency and for the formation of good habits; all these things have in view the development of what is good in man, and must, therefore, be put on our list among the manifestations of our Heavenly Father's love. All things--whatever God does or suffers--are intended for our good. Indeed, the kindness of God's intentions is absolutely infinite. You cannot measure it; you can in no wise number up or appreciate its wonderful manifestations. And, let us add, also, that all these things manifest not only love but wisdom. They are not only done with good intent, but they are done well. As the purpose is good, so is the plan for its attainment, wise. All is love, and all is perfect.

II. Let us now inquire--How ought these manifestations to be received by us?

As kindly as they were intended. Our gratitude should correspond to his loving-kindness. Our confidence should meet his goodness. For, how ought human government to be received in the family, the school, or the State? Plainly, if that government is framed in wisdom, to answer ends of love, it should be met with responsive love and gratitude; should be accepted in a grateful and obedient spirit. Why not?

So should we receive all God's administration in providence. Christian, did you never fall before God, saying--O, Lord, help me to receive this chastisement as kindly as Thou hast intended it. May I be as grateful for it as thou hast been good in its administration."

Sometimes children do not take discipline kindly, although they know they ought to. The fact that "no chastisement for the present seemeth to be joyous," but only grievous, creates a demand for some faith in the wisdom and loving-kindness of the Lord. This faith both honors and pleases God, and surely ought never to be lacking. Manifestly, all the details of God's government over us, should be received in the same docile, humble, and trustful spirit. How do you feel in regard to the way in which your own children receive your discipline toward them? You know you are liable to err in judgment; so do they know this; yet you are wont to feel strongly that so long as you bear your heart and hand toward them in love, and with your best wisdom, they ought to receive it kindly. You claim this as a parent; you feel the reasonableness of this claim all the more from the consciousness of loving them as your own soul. How reasonably, then, may God feel all this, and even more as his love is greater, and the sacrifices he has made for us are exceedingly more manifest and heart-revealing. Besides, he never lacks wisdom--never makes any mistakes. There is no occasion to which that his judgment were as wise as his heart is kind;--it is so, and we have nothing more to wish.

Then why not accept God's discipline as kindly as he gives it? Why should we not? What are we thinking of when we murmur, or question his wisdom or his love? How ought we to receive the gospel? Who can doubt its wisdom and its love? Shall we then receive it as if it were some attack on our happiness and interests? How utterly strange this would be! Yet scarcely more so than to view God's providential discipline towards us as hard. For myself, I have often thought I did not want anything else but to receive all God's discipline toward me just as he gives and intends it--as grateful as he is good--my heart responsive evermore in confidence to his darkest dealings.

Again, how ought we to receive God's gift of a Sabbath? Shall we take it as an assault on our liberty? Shall we deem it only a burden and cry out--O, what a weariness it is? How strangely would this be standing in our own light, and accepting with suspicion what God gives in the purest wisdom and love! Therefore, all reason demands that, under the most afflictive rebukes of his providence, we should bow most trustfully and most humbly, knowing that all these things are intended in the utmost kindness and love. These very things are, more than all the rest, trying to our Heavenly Father's heart; yet they are so useful and even necessary to us, that he may not withhold them.

III. But I must now proceed to inquire, not how God's administration toward us ought to be received by us, but how it is. On this point, what are the facts?

The text has it--"They rewarded me evil for my good, and hatred for my love." Is this in accordance with the facts?

Let us look at the position which sin takes towards God and the interests of his great family. Sin consists in selfishness. In all selfishness, the mind holds on to its own particular interests, real or supposed, and disregards the general interests in comparison with its own. But God, the Father of all, loving all equally, cannot endure selfishness in any one of them, for the good reason that it is intrinsically unjust and ruinous to interests which he loves and defends. He cannot bear to see one of his family outraging the rights of another one out of mere selfishness. This is the reason why he hates and withstands sin. It is not selfish in him to take care of all the interests of his great family, nor to regard their general interests as of supreme importance, for they are really so. Consequently, it cannot be selfish in him to maintain his own honor as King and Lord of all; for, unless he did, how could he rule his subjects so as to ensure their highest good? Hence, to be truly wise and good, he must maintain his dignity and authority against all the insults and abuses of selfish beings, and against all their encroachments on the interests of his great family. It should

never be forgotten, that sin and selfishness are intrinsically unjust;--unjust to God and unjust to his creatures. This injustice God must and ought to oppose. Consequently, every being, persisting in his own selfishness, will fret against God and be rasped by unceasing collision with his righteous administration. It cannot be otherwise. A God who cares justly for all, must forever come into collision with creatures who care excessively for self. He will move on righteously; they will chafe and fret, selfishly; he, seeking evermore to secure the highest good of all; they seeking supremely the small and particular good of self as against all. Hence, it is impossible for a sinner remaining selfish, to deny that he renders to God evil for good. He opposes God for his love to all his great family. On this principle he opposes God's gospel--opposes his Law--opposes his Sabbaths--opposes his means of grace--opposes the course of his providence. Mark any one of these forms of opposition to God. See, for example, how men complain of God's providence. For what? Has God done anything wrong? They do not even pretend that he has. They act like bad children in a family, who are forever restive under a government which they know to be right, yet practically regard as wrong. You know how such children thwart all attempts for their good, rewarding their parents evil for all the good done and attempted to be done for themselves. What is all this rasping and fretting against God? Only selfishness working itself out in requiting God with evil for good--resisting measures which God adopts to bless his great family.

In conclusion, let me ask some personal questions.

Would you, who remain in sin, be any better pleased if God should take a different course with you? What can he do to conciliate you? He would like to be at peace with you if he reasonably could, and never has sought a quarrel with you. Suppose he should abolish his law and not require you to obey him in anything. Suppose he should not ask you to love your neighbor. Would this please you any better? To be released from all requisition from God to love your fellow-beings, would be quite a change; would you like it? You are not easy under his government now; would you have it reversed? Would you have God reverse the requisitions of his law and require you to hate instead of love your neighbor? Would you like this change? No. Your conscience would resist and condemn this new law not less than your selfish heart has resisted the old one. Yea, your whole moral nature would cry out against it. Especially, when other selfish beings come down upon yourself, in obedience to this new law, you would exclaim against it as an infinite outrage. Nay, further, if God were merely to throw up the reins of government and leave every selfish being to prey upon your happiness as much as he pleased, you would cry out against even this as insufferable. You would say--Why does not God take care of his wicked creatures? Why does he not restrain their infamous selfishness? So, while you complain because God governs you to control your selfishness, you would complain infinitely more, and with some good reason too, if he were to do all what you demand for yourself--let men alone, to be as selfish as they list.

Yet, again; would you have the penalty of his law altered? Would you have him make it less? Would it better meet your demands then? But penalties, you know, are infinitely important. Law is good for nothing without them, and hence, their value is just as great as the value of the law itself. You would condemn the change which should annex a finite penalty to an infinitely valuable law. Of course you would, just as you would condemn a law which affixed a ten cent penalty to the crime of murder.

Can you suggest any change in his gospel? What change would improve it? Or can you say how his providence would be administered better? If so, explain how. You do not like its restraints, but suppose they were removed; would you be any the better? Does not your highest reason say there can be no change for the better? Some of you, perhaps, do not like the restraints of this school, or of your own father's family; but does this prove that either is badly governed, or would be better if changed? Yet you

cannot suggest any reasonable improvement. Your own reason affirms that all is as it should be, and that no change for the better can be made. No, in God's great kingdom, you cannot show that any change for the better can be made. Suppose I come to you as God's servant and say--What do you want? You are chafing and fretting against God; what would you have? What change would satisfy your demands? Can you name any change in his providence that would please you, and that you know would be on the whole an improvement? If so, what is it? What change do you demand in his gospel--or in his Bible? Do you say, "It is so difficult for me to become a Christian!" What change shall God make to please you? Shall he forgive you without repentance? Would this please you? Shall he save you without faith on your part--without any confidence in him? But this is a natural impossibility. Without confidence in God, you could not be happy any where in the universe.

What could be more unreasonable than your course toward God? He justly complains--"They have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love." You know this is true! You cannot deny it. And your misbehavior has not been caused by any fault in God, for God's law is unselfish. His whole course towards you is full of loving-kindness, while yours towards him has been altogether selfish and mean.

What can be more trying to God than your course towards him. Think of the sacrifices his love has made to bless you, and then consider how you have requited those sacrifices. Nothing can be so painful to a benevolent heart as this. If any one among you has ever labored to do good to a friend, and that good, so benevolently intended, has been requited only with abuse and evil, you know how this agonizes your heart! You can understand, in some measure, how God must feel when sinners requite him evil for good. God says to them--"Thou has spoken and done evil things, as thou couldst." What worse could they do to him than to abuse his love and repay his kindness with insult--his efforts to save with efforts to bring down on their own heads damnation?

So far as concerns God and the holy, it is infinitely better that you would make war on God for his goodness than for any wickedness. Therefore, it is not well that God should change to accommodate you. So of ourselves; if men will abuse us, let it be for our well-doing and not for our evil-doing. We must, by no means, do evil to accommodate them. It [is] an inexpressible consolation to God's people that sinners never can have any occasion to find fault with God for any thing cruel, tyrannical or severe. There is not the least danger that anything will ever appear in any part of the universe to God's discredit;--nothing that can tarnish his name or reproach his administration. If there were the least reason to fear anything of the sort, it would clothe heaven in mourning, and thrill the hearts of the holy with horror.

Tell me, sinner, is not your course necessarily fatal, either to you or to God? You oppose him; he abhors you. If you are right, it will doubtless one day appear so, and then what can we say for God and his kingdom? But if God is right and you are wrong, you have within yourself the elements of the deepest ruin and destruction. You have such a moral nature--such powers of reason and conscience, that you will certainly condemn yourself, and load your own soul down eternally with self-reproaches and self-condemnation. Though all the universe besides your own soul, were to caress you and shout your praises, yet your own conscience would come down on you with curses which no power in the universe can avert.

Then why not yield? Why not confess and repent? Come out now, in honesty and say--Lord, I have always been dreadfully wicked. I have obeyed neither thy law nor thy gospel. I have not received kindly the things that thou hast so kindly given. So far from this, I have only been rasped and full of dissatisfaction. Have you ever gone before God to say--["I have wronged thee all my life by my suspicions. I have never

realized that thou has had kind intentions for me. To this day, my heart is hard as marble. I am only a wretch--a vile, ungrateful worm! Never have I received thy blessings in a spirit corresponding to the love that gave them." Now why do you not cast yourself down before God in this way, saying--Lord, I know thou hast been good, but I have been utterly and only evil; thou hast sought to bless me, but I have only resisted and abused thee! O break my spirit down in penitence! Can you say--Lord, I am afraid there is something wrong in thy heart? Said a woman to me not long since--"God is not my father. My heart will say--I am so poor, God will not own me. He is my adversary to resist me on every hand. He comes and stands in the way, as he sent an angel to meet Baalam." Now, I am aware that God's dispensations towards individuals sometimes have this appearance, even as old Jacob said--"All these things are against me." When God deals with them in real mercy, and strives to lead them in his own right way, they only rebel the more. Oh, how sad that men are so slow of heart to trust God!

Consider how Jesus Christ is treated, for it is he who speaks in the text. For his love, what hatred does he experience! He who has loved sinners even to his death, how strangely do sinners hate him even to the ruin of their own souls!

But perhaps some of you will say--I know it all; my conscience is wounded desperately; where is any remedy for me? Where can I find any balm for my soul? How can I ever have peace again? My soul is so hard, and my conscience so dead, it surely must be that I am past hope--given over to be lost forever! But have you ever gone to that long-abused Savior, saying--Lord, is there any help for me? Can you persuade yourself to go humbly to him for help? Mark what he says--Wilt thou not from this time cry unto me,--"My Father, thou art the guide of my youth?" Do you say--May I call him Father? Do you ask, Where is he, that I may come even to his seat and pour out my confessions and my sorrows into his ear? Broken-hearted sinner, he is near thee--even where thou art--in thy room--at thy right hand; and it is only for thee to speak, and he heareth thee!

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