

Gospel Liberty

by Charles Finney

Christ makes us free by writing the principle of the law in our hearts, allowing us to obey from love rather than obligation.

Scripture: Matthew 11:28-30, John 8:36, Romans 6:14, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, 2 Corinthians 3:17, Galatians 5:1, Philippians 4:13, Hebrews 12:1-2, James 1:25, 1 John 4:18

Topics: "Freedom in Christ", "Gospel Liberty"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the concept of 'Gospel Liberty,' urging believers to stand firm in the freedom that Christ provides, which liberates them from the burdens of legalism and the yoke of bondage represented by the ceremonial law. He explains that true liberty is found in the spirit of love and obedience, rather than mere adherence to rules, and warns against the dangers of becoming entangled again in legalistic practices that stifle spiritual growth. Finney highlights that Christ makes us free by instilling His spirit within us, allowing us to fulfill the law joyfully and willingly. He encourages Christians to rely on faith and the indwelling Spirit of Christ to maintain their freedom and avoid the pitfalls of bondage. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the essence of love in our relationship with God, which is the true source of liberty.

Transcript

Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.--Galatians 5:1.

In this lecture I shall show,

- I. WHAT IS INTENDED BY THE YOKE OF BONDAGE.
- II. WHAT IT IS TO BE ENTANGLED WITH IT.
- III. WHAT IS THE LIBERTY HERE SPOKEN OF.
- IV. HOW CHRIST MAKES US FREE.
- V. THE DANGER OF BECOMING ENTANGLED AGAIN.
- VI. WHEN CHRISTIANS ARE IN BONDAGE.

VII. WHAT IS THEIR REMEDY.

I. What is intended by the yoke of bondage.

The Apostle had immediately under his eye, the ceremonial law of the Jews. This is evident from the whole context. Judaizing teachers had come in, and were trying to ingraft the cumbersome observances of the Jewish ritual upon the gospel. This the Apostle was so grieved at, and felt to be such a departure from Christ, that he declared they were fallen from grace in complying with such instruction. But it was not simply because he rejected the ceremonial law, and regarded it as useless, that the Apostle thus resisted the observance of it, but because he had his eye on a principle of the last importance to the Church. Why was the ceremonial law a yoke of bondage? Because it had no tendency to reform the heart, and thus render its own observance a matter of choice. Any precept given us, contrary to the state of mind in which we are, is a yoke of bondage. And this is true, whether it be a precept of the Old or New Testament. The principle is universal. You may see it in the conduct of children. Impose some requirement upon them, contrary to the state of their hearts and you will never fail to see that their obedience is not cheerful, but constrained--a mere servitude. Every requirement, then, the spirit of which we have not, is to us a yoke of bondage.

II. What it is to be entangled with it.

1. To see a rule of duty, and feel our obligation to comply with it, and yet have no heart to enter into the spirit of it, is certainly to be entangled with a yoke of bondage. The obligation presses on the one hand, and the heart rejects it on the other, and the condition is one of restless distraction. The law given at Mount Sinai, was a galling yoke for this reason. The Apostle says--'it gendereth to bondage.' Previous to a distinct perception of its claims, men may not be aware of its influence. Paul says--'For I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.' Seeing the thing it required, to be duty, and yet having no heart to perform it, it was a snare unto him. You can easily see how it was. Let anybody be practising any injurious indulgence ignorantly, and there is no sin in it; but let light be thrown into his mind on the subject, and the true nature of the indulgence made known to him, and that moment the struggle commences. Before, he could practice it without compunction, but now his conscience is awake; his appetite still demands it, and the more clearly he sees the law, so much the more is he entangled, until his heart goes fully with the requirement.

2. To take pains to conform to the letter of a law, while destitute of its spirit, is to be entangled. A great many persons set themselves with great punctiliousness, to keep every point of the law, and yet, after all, never feel themselves any better off. Why is this? Because it is mere letter service; there is no heart in it; and the more of such service is rendered, the more exacting is conscience, and the farther is the mind from peace.

3. To strive to satisfy the demands either of the law, the gospel, or the conscience, without faith and love, is to be entangled. The case supposed in the 7th of Romans, represents an individual as setting himself to obey the moral law without its spirit, and the result was a perfect failure. The same is true of persons setting themselves to obey the gospel, without its spirit. They are like a man in a horrible pit of miry clay. Every effort towards obedience, only seems to render them less disposed to obey, and to create greater enmity to the service. The same is true of all attempts to satisfy the demands of conscience, while the heart reluctates from the service.

4. To undertake and assume responsibilities to which we are not equal, that is, to undertake to do any thing in our own strength, is to be entangled. Let an individual go about any duty, or assume any responsibility without the spirit of it, and in his own strength, that is, by dint of his own resolutions, without faith, and he will find himself the more entangled, the farther he goes, just as long as this is his condition.

5. Covenants, vows, promises, &c., where Christ is not consulted and depended upon, only serve to entangle the soul. Sometimes, persons write down covenants of the most solemn and binding character, with the design to hedge themselves in, so that they will not dare to sin, but it does no good, and only brings the soul under a more dire condemnation.

6. Undertaking to do or to be any thing to which the spirit of Christ does not lead you. No matter whether this is obligatory on you or not, if you undertake it without love, it will only be a snare. Thus the law 'gendereth to bondage.'

III. What is the liberty here spoken of.

1. The word liberty is used in two senses.

(1.) As opposed to necessity. In this sense, it consists in the power to choose or refuse any object of choice.

(2.) As opposed to slavery. Slavery is not, as some have supposed, a state of involuntary servitude, for strictly speaking, there is no such thing. Every act the slave performs, is really as voluntary as the act of any other man. His muscles would not move without will. Slavery is a state, in which a man feels constrained to choose between what he regards as two evils. He selects between two alternatives, both of which he abhors. He knows he must labor or be whipped, and he prefers labor to suffering, as the least of two evils. Slavery then, is where a person feels himself shut up to take a course, which on the whole, he does not love, but which he takes rather than to do worse. For example, a person in the marriage state without love, may discharge the outward duties of that relation during life, rather than to separate and sustain all the evils attendant on such a course. So a person may live under a government which he abhors, and yet, rather than subject himself to its frown, may meet all its requisitions. This is acting on the principle of slavery. A person might be compelled to act on the principle of slavery here in New York, as absolutely as in the South, and may as much abhor the service. The difference between one here and one there, is, that there he fears the lash or some other physical infliction, while here, he fears some other evil, which is equally efficient, as he views it, to drive him to the abhorred tasks. Legal professors are slaves in this sense. Their duties are not something which they love, but which must be attended to, or a greater evil endured. Their service is not performed from a love to the end for which it is required, but as the only way to escape the rebukes of conscience, or the wrath of God.

2. This liberty is that of faith and love. When persons come to love, then they delight in acts of love as a matter of course. So much are they free that in obeying God, they do only, what they on the whole, prefer to do, and what they would do whether there was any command or not, could they only see its relation to the good of the universe.

3. In short, this liberty is benevolence. It consists, not in the annihilation of obligation, but in possessing the S[pi]rit of the requirement. Turn to the 13th chapter of the first Corinthians, and mark the characteristics of love which the Apostle there lays down. 'Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily

provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth; but whether there be prophecies they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.' This description of charity or benevolence, shows that the free man naturally acts according to the requirement. It is spontaneous with him. He acts from a principle within himself rather than from a law without. He does not act from restraint, but obedience is with him, what it was with Christ. Christ did not need the sanctions of the law to induce obedience, but what the precept required, was just what, above all other things, he loved to do. So it is with those who are in this liberty. They do not act under the rod.

4. They are not governed by authority, but act spontaneously, from choice. They only need to know what will please God, and they do it willingly and of a ready mind. They do not neglect to do what is required of them, but they do it from love, and that is the perfection of liberty. When a man is able to choose in any direction in all circumstances, and does just what he has a mind to, that is the highest liberty in the universe. That is freedom in its highest sense.

IV. How Christ makes us free.

1. Not by abolishing the moral law.

2. Not by discharging us from any obligation to fulfill any or every duty.

3. Nor by relaxing the claims of any moral precept, in either the Old or New Testament.

4. But as it respects the ceremonial law, He fulfilled and abolished it, so that nobody is under farther obligation to obey it.

5. And as it respects the moral law, He makes us free by writing its principle, and all its spirit in our hearts. And what a sweet way this is! Suppose we should thus govern our children. What delightful families we should have. All our commands the very thing they chose, so that for us to intimate our will, would be to see it sweetly done. When Christ begets the spirit of the law in us, and then shows us the outward precept, the precept is just what we are pre-disposed to do, and of course it will be done by us cheerfully.

6. He makes us free by making the course of conduct prescribed in the whole Bible, as natural and spontaneous as it is with Himself; and therefore, we are free in the same sense that He is free, and that all in heaven are free. God, no doubt, feels bound to be benevolent, but his will is just what his infinite reason requires, and He is, therefore, infinitely free, and so is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is just the freedom He seeks to bestow on us.

7. He accomplishes this by his indwelling Spirit. He comes to reside in us, that He may beget in us the same state of mind there is in Christ, whom it is his office to exhibit to us.

8. He does it by so revealing Christ to us, as to gain the implicit confidence and affection of the soul. It is not accomplished by any physical force. How do we, if we want to get the confidence of persons, exhibit to them such views of our character as to win their confidence and love. So Christ, by revealing Himself in those traits of his character, which He knows are adapted to win the confidence of men, brings them into the same state of mind with Himself. He shows them that He is love, well knowing that this is the readiest way to make them love. There is no other way to make men benevolent. Weep yourself, if you want others to weep. Suppose a father is benevolent, and he wants to make his children so too. How can he do it? By using the rod? Or drilling them in the catechism? No. But by acting it out before them. One great reason

why the children of professedly religious parents are so seldom converted is because the parents so constantly command them, without sufficient manifestations of benevolence. They are commanded to read the Bible, to go to Sabbath School, to get their tasks in such a way, that it becomes irksome to them, instead of attractive and interesting. Let parents only temper all their commands sufficiently with benevolence, and it would not be so. It is thus that Christ wins the hearts of sinners, and makes them free. When He came, the idea of true religion was almost lost in the world, but He acted it out in his whole life. His disciples looked on and wondered, till finally they caught the flame. And what then? Why they shook the world with it. And it is the exhibition of this spirit alone, which can consummate the victory, and liberate our race. It is thus He makes us free from the yoke of bondage--from obligation to keep the ceremonial law--from the penalty of the moral law--from the spirit of bondage, by writing his law in our hearts--from the dominion of sin and from the power of the world, the flesh, and the devil. This is the glorious liberty wherewith Christ makes his people free.

V. The danger of becoming entangled again.

1. The least unbelief brings bondage. Let a wife lose confidence in her husband in any respect, and in that respect, her obedience will be constrained and stiff. So it is in religion. If there is any want of confidence, instead of your service being free and out-gushing, it will be forced and heartless.

2. Grieving the Holy Spirit will beget bondage. Whenever He withdraws his presence from the mind, then it falls right into bondage.

3. Admitting the least selfishness, naturally leads into bondage. Observe, religion is benevolence. The least selfishness, then, is bondage of course.

4. Any abstraction of the mind from Christ, of course begets bondage. No person, as a matter of fact, lives a spiritual life without Christ. We must feed on Him. We need Him as much as we do our natural food. We maintain our liberty only by thinking on Him, and communing with Him continually.

5. Any attempts to coerce the mind by oaths, vows, covenants, and resolutions, beget bondage. If a man has the Spirit of Christ, he does not need these, and if he has not, he can never get it in this way. I have known persons to pray all night, and screw themselves up to the most solemn vows and covenants which they could frame, and yet it availed nothing. There was no religion in it; not an atom. And when persons attempt to coerce themselves in this way, they universally fail of success.

6. Taking upon your conscience, an obligation to conform to any particular forms and ceremonies not prescribed by Christ. It is truly astonishing to see to what an excess the Jews loaded themselves down, in adhering to what they supposed were the requirements of the ceremonial law. They multiplied days, and traditions, and tithes, and purifications, almost without end. So it has been in the Church of Rome. She multiplied her vows, and pilgrimages, and fasts, to such an extent as could result in nothing else but a mere outside show, and work the destruction of souls. Even undertaking to conform with those that are required, in your own strength, is enough to bring any soul into terrible bondage.

7. But the multiplying of holy days, and religious observances and ceremonies, cannot result in any thing else. Even among Protestants, how many regard it as a duty, to observe Christmas. I have been afraid our Methodist brethren were becoming entangled. They seem to consider it a duty to watch out the old year, and in the new, and no matter whether sleepy or not, they must be there to satisfy both custom and conscience. Even monthly concerts come to be a yoke. The truth is, we are bound to resist such things,

whenever they come to be regarded as binding on the conscience. These holy days in the Romish Church, became so numerous as to take up a great part of the time, and now, in many of the Catholic countries, if you employ a man to work, you get but very little out of him.

8. Binding yourselves by church covenants, especially if there is any thing in them contrary to the law of reason and of love. We hear of no such thing in the Apostles' days. The truth is, I am jealous of them. One embraces one thing, and another, another; and the first thing you know, you are reined up. "Why you are a violator of your covenant." Am I? "Yes." I have known several cases of this kind. Let no one be bound but by the law of love, which is the perfect law of liberty.

VI. When Christians are in bondage.

1. When the duties of religion are a burden. While we are in liberty, they are no burden. As an old writer says--"I sought all nature through, to find something like the burden of Christ, and could find nothing till I came to the pinions of the dove, which instead of weighing down, bear up the soul on high."

2. When the form is observed, without the spirit and power of godliness. Many have, and keep up the form very scrupulously, when the life and spirit have gone. But their piety is like a mere lifeless corpse, or hollow shell.

3. When driven by conscience, instead of being drawn by love. Oh, how many are attempting to live by mere resolutions forced up by conscience, without one particle of love to Christ!

4. When they don't find their heart spontaneously doing what is required. When the waters of life do not flow spontaneously out from them--when it is not nature's promptings to pray, to give to the poor, or perform any other duty. When persons have the spirit of religion, instead of needing a command, they feel an inward going of the soul in the right direction, and the performance of duty gives them sweet enjoyment.

5. When the soul has no peace, and no enjoyment in religion, it is under the yoke of bondage. True liberty, is essential peace and blessedness.

VII. What is their remedy.

1. Persons will never get into liberty by any legal, heartless efforts. That is beginning exactly at the wrong end; it is beginning on the outside to work inward, instead of beginning at the inside to work outward. People often become prodigiously excited, and go to doing, doing, doing, under the pressure of obligation; but where is the relief? This is particularly the case in many protracted meetings and special efforts, but when the meetings stop, where is their religion in a vast number of cases? I am not saying any thing against such meetings, but against the manner in which the truth is too often preached, and the meeting conducted. The process is just such as to set the sensibility all on fire with powerful excitement, and leave the heart unsubdued to love. This is all wrong, and only adapted to foster mere heartless legality.

2. But the only remedy is faith in Christ, and application to his blood. 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.' Cast the whole soul upon Him, to receive the spirit of obedience. I have often seen persons striving and pushing for months, but all to no purpose. They were not one whit better, and it was not till they saw that it would not make them better if they should continue thus a thousand years, and until they cast themselves wholly on Christ, to receive the spirit of obedience from Him, that they entered into gospel liberty. 'Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will

give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

REMARKS.

1. You may see from this subject, the difference between a legal and a gospel religion. A legal religion is works without love, a gospel religion, works by love. A brother said the other day, he did not understand this distinction. Why it is obvious as the distinction between day and night. Both the true Christian and the legalist works, but the one works with, the other without love. They both do the same things outwardly, but the one is free and the other a slave in the performance.

2. See why the moral law is called the perfect law of liberty. It was ordained to life, and when obeyed in its spirit, gives life. But why do persons find it unto death? Because when the spirit is lost, the letter kills. It is when it is legally, that is, heartlessly obeyed, that it works our overthrow instead of our deliverance.

3. See what is intended by such passages as Gal. 5:18, 'But if ye be led by the Spirit, ye are not under the law;' and Rom. 6:14, 'For sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the law, but under grace.' It is not intended that the law is abolished, but that its spirit has become their law. They are not under it in such a sense as to need its sanctions to press them up to duty.

4. Many feel that their religion is mere slavery--a hard, up-hill business. The language of their heart is, "it is hard to obey, and harder still to love." But they are ignorant of the true nature of religion. It is the easiest thing in the world to him that has it. Legalists complain about this world, that it is such a bad one, so hard to live in, and keep right. But it is not such a hard world as they think. Religion certainly does not make it any harder, but altogether easier. The difficulty with those who find it such a hard world, is, that their hearts are bad, and if they find it a severe task to obey God, it is because they have not the spirit of obedience. If they have any religion it is of the wrong kind, and they are entirely deceived if they think all others have the same kind that they have. Some persons, when they see others joyful, say they are deceived. They don't feel so themselves, and they wonder how any body can. And then they point to the seventh chapter of Romans, or to David Brainerd, who, although a good man, was so hypochondriacal that his experience would be gloomy as a matter of course. Such persons are always suspicious whenever they see any of the spirit of liberty manifested, and I don't wonder, for mankind are naturally suspicious of those beyond themselves. How strange it must appear to them, and how it must stumble them to see persons almost dance for joy when they emerge from bondage, and yet this is not wonderful. Why, see that slave, with his back all blistered in the sun, set free. Is it strange that he should leap and bound about with fulness of joy? It is thus that Christians feel, and the Bible commands them to rejoice; but legalists don't understand it, and think they are possessed of the devil. Why, I have sometimes heard persons say, "That's not solemn--its fanaticism." And then they turn to some gloomy slave with a dead body strapped on his back, and groaning under his burden, and say--"That's the humble one--he's none of your visionaries!"

5. Multitudes have no true idea of gospel liberty. They have made a credible profession of religion, and are toiling out its duties, but what liberty means they know not--and perhaps they are even ministers of the gospel! Of course, such persons don't expect liberty. I recently heard of a revival, in which the minister said to inquirers, "don't expect to be happy in this world; I never was, nor do I expect to be until I get to heaven. I don't know what it is to have enjoyment in religion." Now there is a fundamental error in such instruction. Not happy! Had I been present where such instruction was given, I would have told that

minister that he was not a converted man if that was his experience. It is thus that a legal religion is inculcated on converts, by legal ministers and legal professors. But how many persons are just here--afraid to find any other way, for fear it will lead to delusion! O, that it might be seen that a religion which does not produce present peace and blessedness, is not, of course, a religion of love, and is therefore false.

6. Any course of instruction that presses duty without holding up Christ, is like requiring labor without food and brings into bondage. It is like requiring the Israelites to make brick without straw, and those who give such instruction are obliged to whip, and scourge, and abuse the dear Church of God to get the little service they do out of them. Hold up duty without Christ and legality is inevitable. They are starved for want of Christ. But let them see Christ and they will work, of course, as duty is appropriately enforced.

7. It is the other extreme to hold up Christ without calling to duty, and begets antinomianism. To feed the Church with Christ and leave them inactive, is the way to produce a religious dyspepsia. But give us the right food and work enough to do, and then we will thrive. Only let us have the bread that cometh down from heaven, and we shall have spiritual health, and even physical health, if we only have work enough to keep us busy.

8. If we may believe the confessions of the great mass of professors, they are in bondage. This fact has weighed on my mind for a long time. I labored to convert sinners for many years, but saw them fall, under the legal instruction of ministers, into bondage. I labored and prayed for them night and day, and do now, and yet they seem to know little of liberty. They often, by their looks, seem to ask, "Is this Christianity?" "Is this the boasted religion of Christ?" "Wherein does it differ from the Jew's religion?" A man said to me once with great honesty, although in vulgar language, "The gospel is not what it is cracked up to be." His idea was that the gospel promised liberty, but did not confer it. Now how many would say just so, if they would tell their hearts. They would say "the gospel is not what the Apostle said it was." Yes, poor soul, it is, but you have not got it. Taste and see. Come to the gospel feast. You have compassed that mountain long enough. Don't expect Christ to make you free while you turn your back on Him.

9. When the power of religion is gone, the form but hardens the heart, and makes men more pharisaical and hypocritical every day. What, you say, would you have a man do? Cast off his profession, and stop prayer, and go back to the world? No, but love and serve in the [S]pirit. But if you will not do this, then give up your profession, that is my advice. Do you doubt whether God would rather have you give up your profession, than live in mere form, and heartless obedience? 'I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art luke-warm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.' How loathsome to Him are the mockeries, and slavish obedience to his holy will! The text represents Christ as actually vomiting them up. Now I would not recommend apostacy but condemn hypocrisy, and bring you to Christ.

10. None really understand this liberty but those who have experienced it, and those who have experienced it cannot find language to express it.

11. Many exclaim against antinomianism who are mere legalists, while both these characters are an abomination to God.

12. When the shepherds attempt to drive instead of lead the flock, they lay a snare before them. We cannot make people love by whipping, scolding, and driving them. God has given his law with its sanctions, but He opens his blessed heart to beget love. Dearly beloved, are any of you in bondage? Have you left your first love? Did somebody tell you that you must go down into the valley of humiliation, and did

you go? Alas! what a mistake! When you should have gone up to the mountain by faith. What is true humility? Will you return to your first love? And will you 'commit the keeping of your souls to Him in well doing as unto a faithful Creator?' Let us all go to Christ to receive our liberty.

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