

Governing the Tongue

by Charles Finney

The tongue must be governed by the law of love, and if it is not, there is and can be no true religion.

Scripture: Proverbs 10:19, Ecclesiastes 5:2, James 1:26

Topics: "True Religion", "Governing the Tongue"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the critical importance of governing the tongue as a reflection of true religion, arguing that a tongue not bridled by love and benevolence renders one's faith vain. He outlines the rules and conditions necessary for controlling speech, asserting that a heart filled with perfect love and entire consecration to God is essential for benevolent communication. Finney warns that without the governance of the tongue, true religion cannot exist, as idle words and selfish intentions contradict the law of love. He calls for moral courage to speak and remain silent appropriately, highlighting the need for self-examination in our speech. Ultimately, he urges believers to surrender their tongues to Christ for true sanctification and effective witness.

Transcript

"If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain." --James 1:26

In remarking upon these words, I will notice--

I. THE RULE BY WHICH THE TONGUE IS TO BE GOVERNED.

II. THE CONDITIONS UPON WHICH IT IS TO BE GOVERNED.

III. SHOW THAT WHERE THE TONGUE IS NOT GOVERNED, THERE IS AND CAN BE NO TRUE RELIGION.

I notice--

I. The rule by which the tongue is to be governed.

1. The rule is that of perfect, disinterested, and universal benevolence or love. This is the unalterable law of right. Whatever responsible act of a moral agent is not conformed to this, is wrong; whatever is conformed to this, is right. Love, or benevolence is the fulfilling of the law. This is the one and only rule to

which all responsible actions of all moral beings are always and universally to be conformed. This is the rule by which the tongue is to be governed. The tongue is directly and by a law of necessity governed by the heart or will. It cannot move unless moved by the will. It cannot be either good or bad without the will's consent and impulse. No other power can govern it, nor can any other power prevent its being used in conformity with the action of the will.

2. The same rule stated in other language is, that of entire consecration to God and the good of being. This is only good willing or benevolence expressed in other language. Entire consecration to God and to the good of being, is an act or state of the will. It is the will in the attitude of devoting, consecrating, offering up the whole being to the promotion of universal good. Entire consecration is the rule by which the tongue is to be governed. It should be consecrated by the heart to the glory of God and the good of being, and used for no other purpose whatever.

3. The Scriptures recognize this truth. "But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." Idle words in the sense of this text are useless words, words not spoken to edification, nor with a design to glorify God and benefit man. Some commentators over-looking the rule by which the tongue is to be governed, have supposed by idle words in this passage, are meant slanderous, or false, or censorious, or bitter words. But the language is plain, and should be understood in its plain natural sense; for then and only then does it come up to the manifest rule by which the tongue is to be governed. That the tongue is to be governed by the rule of universal love, or entire consecration to God, none can rationally doubt. All words then spoken for any other end than to promote the good of being are idle words, and are sin against God. To bridle the tongue then is to so check and rein it in, and control it, as that its use shall be wholly conformed to the law of God.

II. The conditions upon which it may be governed.

1. The first condition indispensable to the government of the tongue in accordance with the rule as above stated, is perfect love in the heart, or in other words, that the will should be in a benevolent attitude--that the glory of God and the good of being should be its supreme aim, design, or choice. I have said that the tongue is governed by the will, by a law of necessity. The will is free, but the tongue is not free. It is connected by a physical or necessary law, with the action of the will. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth not only does but must speak, if it speaks at all. All our physical powers so far as they are directly under our control at all, are connected with the action of the will, by a law of necessity. At the bidding of the will they move, or cease to move. Now where then [there] is perfect benevolence of heart, no power that is under the control of the will can be used in any other than a benevolent manner. When the heart is in the attitude of supreme, disinterested benevolence, the tongue is used and cannot [but] be used for the glory of God and the good of being. But if this be not the state of the heart, the tongue cannot be used benevolently. All use of the tongue is idle and sinful when the heart is not in a benevolent state. No matter how much the tongue might edify men or glorify God, its use is an idle use so far as the speaker is concerned, if his aim be not benevolent. A man might teach mathematics, philosophy, or theology with a selfish heart, in which case the use of his heart [tongue] is sin, because his intention is sin. It is not conformed to the law of love, but is under the influence of selfishness. If God overrules this selfish use of the tongue to promote his own glory, no thanks to him who thus uses his tongue, for he means no such thing. His object is to glorify himself, to get a good name, or a piece of bread. It should always be understood that any use of the tongue is sinful when the heart is not in a perfectly benevolent state.

2. The spirit of entire consecration is an indispensable condition to the government of the tongue. As I have already said, this is only another way of stating the same rule, and this condition is only another form of stating the spirit of the same condition. If the heart be entirely consecrated to God, the tongue will be, and must be, and cannot but be consecrated also; but when ever the heart is not entirely consecrated, the tongue if used at all, is used idly, with selfish intentions and not for the glory of God.

3. It is an important and often indispensable condition of governing the tongue that we abstain from very strong excitement. If the feelings become very strongly excited, they are very apt to control the will. At this point all virtue ceases of course. The will acts virtuously, only when it obeys the law of the intelligence, or in other words, the commandments of God as they are revealed in the intelligence. When the feelings instead of God through the intelligence give law to the will, there is no virtue. People are very apt to imagine that they are virtuous in proportion as they are governed by strong feelings; whereas exactly the reverse of this is true.

I have said that when feeling becomes very strong, it is very apt to control the will. The will then acts purely in obedience to the impulses of feeling, under no other law than that of obeying the most strongly excited emotions. Now if the will in obedience to feeling governs the tongue, it is not governed by the law of love or benevolence. Be sure there is always feeling and sometimes strong feeling when there is true benevolence, and as the result of true benevolence. But the law of benevolence and not of feeling, should control the will and consequently the tongue.

Farther, when the mind is strongly excited we are apt to speak extravagantly and often falsely in fact, without ourselves at the time realizing it. We behold things through a medium which magnifies greatly. We almost of course represent them as they appear to us,--which is usually a misrepresentation. For my own part, I can say that I seldom get strongly excited on any subject without having occasion afterward to repent of something that I said during my excitement.

4. A deeply considerate or reflective state of mind is indispensable to the proper government of the tongue. The man who speaks without consideration and without thinking, speaks idly and at random. Surely if he would speak for the edification of men and the glory of God, he needs to have his thoughts about him and to think well before he speaks.

5. Another condition is a sense of the divine presence. Let a man set God always before him, and realize that he is speaking in the presence of God, and he will bridle his tongue. His words will be few and well chosen. He cannot trifle, realizing that he is in the presence of the great, heart-searching God, nor will he speak falsely, censoriously, bitterly, or unnecessarily. Only let his heart be full of love, and let him have a conscious realization of the divine presence, and the law of love shall ever dwell upon his tongue.

6. Another condition of governing the tongue is the appropriate grace and strength of Christ. Indeed Christ must be in him, working in him to will, to say, and to do, or he will never govern his tongue. He must put off the old man which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and put on the new man. He must abide in Christ and Christ must abide in him. He must live a life of faith in Christ Jesus. He must walk in the Spirit and entirely mortify the deeds of the flesh. He must know what it is to yield up his whole body, "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

7. He must have faith to lay hold of and appropriate the grace, strength, and promises of Christ for the complete subjugation of his tongue to the law of love. He must believe in Christ and receive Christ as the keeper of his tongue as well as of all his other powers. He will never govern his own tongue: he will never

in this respect keep himself. He must have faith to lay hold of that class of promises which pledge sufficient grace to secure the entire consecration of all his powers to God.

8. He must have moral courage to dare to keep silence when he ought to keep silence. It is generally considered very odd and uncouth, unsociable and hateful for a man to keep silence when he has nothing important to say. The state of society seems to demand that to be good company, he must discharge from his tongue a perpetual stream of words. Volley after volley of sense or nonsense must be poured forth, or people will inquire, What ails you? You seem to be very silent, very unsociable; you seem to be brooding over some distressing subject; you need cheerful society and recreation, amusement or light-reading--something to give your tongue an impulse. Now in these days of incessant babble when the world is full of talk about beaux and belles, and novels and politics and every thing else, who does not know that it requires a good deal of moral courage to be silent when not called to speak for the glory of God and the good of man?

(a.) You must have moral courage to dare to speak when you ought, and what you ought. Men are often placed in circumstances where it is no small trial for them to speak what the circumstances demand--to reprove sin and hold up the truth in love. Now the proper government of the tongue, demands not only that we should abstain from speaking what we ought not, but that we should always speak when and what we ought. But to dare to do this, often requires no small amount of courage.

(b.) Again, you need moral courage to be as singular in all places, and at all times, as conformity to the law of love would make you. How eccentric a man would be called in these days, who should use his tongue neither more nor less nor for any other purpose than the glory of God and the good of man demand.

III. Where the tongue is not governed, there is and can be no true religion.

1. In proof of this position I cite the text. "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain."

2. It is not intended that an occasional fall in the use of the tongue, proves that one has never been converted and is at no time truly religious; but that when he does not govern his tongue, he has at that time no true conformity to the law of God, and consequently no true religion. His heart is not then in the attitude of benevolence. It if were he could not misuse his tongue. But if he be not benevolent, he is not at the time truly religious. Again,

3. When the tongue is not habitually governed in accordance with this rule, there is no habitual benevolence--consequently no habitual true religion, which if the Bible is true, is the same thing as to say, there is no true religion at all. For the least that can be said of a true christian, is that he does not habitually sin; that holiness is the rule and sin only the exception. "And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him. Little children let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil; whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother."

4. I have already said that a benevolent heart will secure and by a law of necessity must secure a benevolent use of the tongue; that is, in such a case the tongue will be and must be used for the glory of God and the good of being. Where it is not so used, it is a palpable matter of fact that the heart is not right with God. Nothing can be more certain than that a spirit of idle talking is inconsistent with a benevolent state of the heart.

REMARKS.

1. The Bible represents the government of the tongue not only as indispensable to true religion, but as its most difficult duty. Thus James, in chapter third, "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea is tamed and hath been tamed by mankind: but the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be."

2. The Bible says much upon the necessity of bridling the tongue. I will only quote two or three passages in addition to those already quoted. Eccl. 5:2, 3; "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thy heart be hasty to utter any thing before God; for God is in heaven and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by the multitude of words." Prov. 10:19; "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin; but he that refraineth his lips is wise."

3. If every idle word is sin, what multitudes of professors are living in sin! Great multitudes of professors give themselves up to unrestrained indulgence in talking, as really and fully as the great mass of sinners who make no pretensions to religion. Rely upon it, they will never go babbling on to heaven. Idle talkers and vain jesters are not among the ransomed of the Lord.

4. What a world of evil would be put away if the tongue were governed by the law of love. It is indeed "a world of iniquity; it often setteth on fire the course of nature, and is set on fire of hell." The tongue is the great instrument of excitement. We excite ourselves and we excite others by talking. All the busy play of passion, and all its monstrous developments are aroused, and quickened, and thrown into overwhelming commotion by the idle use of the tongue.

Let the tongue be governed by the law of love, and what a change would be made in families and neighborhoods, in cities and towns, in all human society! What a change in our halls of legislation!

5. The government of the tongue is indispensable to entire sanctification; that is, no man is entirely sanctified unless he entirely governs his tongue by the law of love. Let this always be understood and kept in mind by those who profess to have attained, or who are aiming to attain to a state of entire sanctification.

6. It does not seem to be generally understood and believed, that every idle word is sin. Many who profess to keep a conscience void of offense, and to be from day to day not conscious of sin, seem manifestly

often to use their tongues in a manner not conformed to the law of love. Who can believe that all the heedless and idle talking that we hear among professed Christians is for the glory of God and the good of man, or that it is even intended to be?

7. Idle words are as really sinful, as false, censorious, or profane words. I say they are as really sinful. They may be vastly more sinful, or they may be less sinful according to the light enjoyed. One man may be in the sight of God vastly more guilty for levity in conversation than another for profanity. The degree of guilt depends upon the degree of light before the mind. There is great want of consideration upon this subject. If the most ignorant man tells a falsehood, or is profane, we cry out against him; and if he is a member of the church, we excommunicate him. Now this is all well; for the most ignorant man knows better than to lie or to be profane. But others, with greater light than he, may be equally guilty and equally deserving of excommunication, for an idle use of the tongue.

8. From this subject we see the necessity of judging our character in the light of this test. Every day and every hour we should examine ourselves in the use of our tongues. We are almost incessantly using them, and unless we keep the rule in view by which they are to be governed, a world of iniquity will accumulate upon our souls before we are aware of it.

9. This subject is of great importance to families. The necessity of governing the tongue should be constantly inculcated in every family. Observance of this rule is indispensable to the life and power of family religion.

10. The indispensable necessity of governing the tongue, should be urged in common schools, and in all places where children and youth are associated together. If children are allowed to make an unrestrained use of their tongues in respect to levity and unrestrained talking, a most important part of their education is omitted. What though they are taught that they must not lie, or be profane, or vulgar, or licentious in conversation, this is of little use, unless they are taught that their tongues are to be governed entirely by the law of universal love.

11. This subject is of great importance to ministers of the gospel. I have heard it said of some ministers--"When I see him in the pulpit I think he never ought to come out; and when I see him out, I think he never ought to go in." There are some ministers--I hope not many--who preach well and solemnly; but when out of the pulpit, they are very much given to levity, to jesting, and trifling conversation, insomuch that their idle talk out of the pulpit completely nullifies the spiritual power of their preaching in it. My brother, unless you use your tongue for God's glory out of the pulpit, you have no right to expect to be blessed in the use of it in the pulpit. Take care what you say, always, and in all places, and be sure you do not have the spirit of levity, and an idle, gossiping state of mind; for if you have, out of the abundance of the heart the mouth will speak, and the people will see it. Your Christian and ministerial influence will be destroyed, and you will become a stumbling-block to souls. O! a trifling minister--what a curse to human society--what a dishonor to God!

12. The tongue is a great occasion of backsliding. Let a man but open his mouth and give up the rein to the tongue in any company and at any time, and he will soon find that when he has done talking he cannot pray. Let him try it. I have no doubt that many professors of religion have grieved the Spirit of God an hundred and a thousand times by idle words--have found themselves away from God and without the spirit of prayer, with gross darkness covering them, yet do not realize the cause. Ask them what they have done to get away from God, and they say they can't tell. If they would but reflect upon the use they have made

of their tongues, they would find cause enough. Let them take their pens and attempt to recall and record all the idle words, and they will soon be convinced that innumerable sins have accumulated upon their souls, and shut out from them the light of heaven.

13. An unbridled tongue is not only a great snare to him who uses it, but is a great temptation, a snare, and a curse to those who listen. One man or woman given to much talking, may divert the attention of hundreds of minds from God; may engage multitudes of tongues in replying to their incessant babble; and indeed a world of words, idle as the wind, if not hateful and blasphemous, may be occasioned by some one great talker. A great talker, in the common acceptance of that term is a curse to any family, to any neighborhood, to any church, to any community, to the world. His unruly tongue must be restrained, or he will scatter around him, fire-brands, arrows, and death.

14. From this subject we can see the great evil and the great sin of what are termed social visits. Who does not know that it is almost impolite to talk otherwise than idly on those occasions? To introduce and confine yourself to religion or any other topic of serious import, designed for the glory of God and the general good of man, would be considered excessively ill-timed and out of place. The fact is, that social parties are designed for the unrestrained indulgence of the tongue. They would soon cease to be attended if no other conversation were allowed than what is for the glory of God and the good of man. How often, think you, would the gay and thoughtless multitude assemble in social parties, if no other conversation were allowed but such as is in accordance with the law of God?

It is amazing to hear professors of religion defend and plead for what they call the cultivation of the social powers. It is manifest that they often mean by this nothing more nor less than the cultivation of that idle gossip, that chit chat, idle, frivolous course of conversation, pursued in what are called social parties. How any person that even pretends to be consecrated to God can give up his tongue, his time, and his powers to be used in that manner, has always been mysterious to me since I have know any thing about religion.

15. Many persons never keep their tongues still, long enough to be converted. They talk so incessantly, that if at any time the Spirit of the Lord comes near and strives with them, they grieve him right away by their idle talk. They ought to understand that the Spirit comes to convict and persuade; that is, to make men think, and see things in their true light. They should know that without serious thought and deep, intense reflection, they will never turn to the Lord. Thus the Psalmist says, "I thought on my ways and turned my feet unto thy testimonies." "Thus saith the Lord--consider your ways." God complains of his professed people, that "they will not consider." How can they consider, when they cultivate the habit of giving incessant license to their tongues? Many impenitent sinners seem never to have thought that they should restrain their tongues, and speak only when and what duty calls them to speak.

16. It is a great evil to be thrown into the society of a great talker. He will neither think himself nor suffer you to do so; but babble on incessantly, like the running of a brook. If for a moment you try to think, some impertinent question, some trifling thing which you neither know nor care about, is thrust into your face, and demands a reply. O, if such men once knew the luxury of deep and silent thought, and would sometimes retire within themselves and let others think, they would do the world a favor.

17. Great multitudes of professors of religion seem unable to grow in grace and become established in religion, because of the idle use of their tongues. This sin must be overcome; it must be put away. Professor, it is too hard for you to attempt it in your unassisted strength. No man can tame the tongue, but Christ can tame it. Christ governed his own tongue, and can govern yours if you will give it up to him and

let him become its keeper. Will you do it? When will you do it? Will you do it now? Will you consecrate your tongue to him with the full understanding that you shall never use it any more but for the glory of God, any more than you would use it to blaspheme his holy name? Do it, my brother, my sister: do it now!

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