

Guilt Modified by Ignorance

by Charles Finney

God commands all men to repent, and those who resist reform when light demands it will be destroyed.

Scripture: Proverbs 28:13, Ezekiel 18:30, Matthew 5:14-16, Luke 13:3, Acts 17:30, Romans 12:2, Galatians 6:7-8, James 4:17, 2 Peter 3:9, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Repentance", "Moral Responsibility"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of repentance in light of increased moral understanding, arguing that ignorance once excused certain behaviors, but now, with greater knowledge, individuals are held to a higher standard of accountability. He applies this principle to contemporary issues such as temperance and slavery, urging Christians to recognize their moral responsibilities and act against injustices. Finney asserts that true repentance involves a change of heart and actions, and he calls for immediate reform in response to the light of truth. He warns that failure to repent when one is enlightened leads to greater guilt and potential destruction for individuals and nations alike. The sermon challenges Christians to engage actively in moral reform and to uphold their responsibilities in the face of societal issues.

Transcript

"And the times of this ignorance God winked at, but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent."
--Acts 17:30

This passage is part of Paul's sermon at Athens. In discussing it I shall,

- I. Show what it means.
- II. Apply its principles to some of the great moral movements of the present age.
- III. Show what is implied in repentance.
- IV. Show why men should repent and reform now.

I. Paul is speaking of those places and times where the gospel had not been. It was concerning moral actions performed then and there that Paul said, "God winked at" them. This affirmed a plain and well-established truth, viz: that men are held responsible morally according to their light. Speaking of times when men were but imperfectly enlightened, he did not say men were then absolutely guiltless, but only comparatively so. Their sins were a matter of comparative unimportance. When we use this

language--wink at a thing--we mean Let it pass with slight notice--let it go. Such must have been Paul's meaning. The principle assumed is as I have said, a well-established one--that men are guilty, or not guilty, or as the case may be, are more or less guilty, according to the knowledge they have or do not have, of their duty.

II. Applying this well-established principle, which all men hold and must hold, I remark, that since my recollection, a vast amount of light has been thrown on many great moral questions, and consequently the conduct of men in reference to the points they involve has assumed very different shades of moral character.

For example, the question of Temperance. I can well remember when ministers used to drink before they went into the pulpit and drink after they came out of it. The same practices still continue in other countries. Then they thought it no wrong, unless they drank to excess, and beyond their own convictions of right. They measured their ideas of its harm by their own standard. But now so much light is abroad that the moral character of rum-drinking is essentially modified. In those very places where men drank without much guilt, they can no longer drink at all without great guilt. Then men were often advised to drink by their physicians. They thought they ought to drink for the sake of health. But this apology is available no longer. Why not? Because men have learned that health does not demand rum-drinking. They now know that it is wrong to use ardent spirits as a beverage, and that very rarely indeed does it need to be used as a medicine. Of course they cannot use the article as of old without great guilt--without losing every particle of their piety.

So on the subject of slavery. For a long time this subject was scarcely discussed at all. Slavery was abolished so quietly and gradually in the Northern States, that but little general discussion was excited. Yet the manner of its abolition in the North left the impression that Northern men had nothing to do with its abolition in the South. The work having been achieved by state legislative action, and without much of any foreign influence of any sort, it was not unnaturally assumed that other states would abolish slavery in the same way. Indeed so little attention was given to this subject by Northern men, that they did not notice the gradual encroachments of the slave power upon the general government.

But this state of things has greatly changed. Now men generally understand the relations of slavery to the national government. The startling fact is but too apparent that our Union is virtually a slaveholding state, and that Congress have seriously undertaken to make the entire domain of our country a slaveholding land. They enact their Fugitive Slave Bill into so-called law, and then send their commissioned agents into the free states, upon free soil, to compel free men, whose souls abhor slavery, to become slave-catchers, and to deliver up unto their masters or claimants, the servant that has escaped--in the very face of God's own command to the contrary, not to say also in the very face of every dictate of humanity. When the Northern states set their own slaves free, they had no thought of ever being dragged thus into the support of slavery. They expected, and were authorized to expect that the example of emancipation would be followed by the Southern states. But instead of this, what do we see? Laws enacted by Congress which people all the free states with commissioners authorized to seize men as slaves--which deny them a jury trial and the right of habeas corpus--which leave them only the miserable mockery of the forms of trial, and which then, under heavy pains and penalties, compel us to sustain all this iniquity, and aid in dragging the arrested victim into hopeless bondage.

I do not want to rail--you who hear me preach so often know full well that I am not; nor do I mean to rail on the worst of men or the most oppressive of their measures now; but the question what we, as christian

men shall do under this monstrous oppression is really momentous. The question now has taken this form; shall we individually and personally aid in making men slaves?

This makes a solemn issue. I feel it to be such. So must all Northern men and Northern Christians. It is a new issue. We did not expect when we entered into this Union, that we were to be dragooned into the business of slave-hunting. We did not calculate then to become the tools of the slave power, to help make men found on free soil slaves. We must make up our minds how we will act under this new issue.

This whole subject presents some curious questions pertaining to political action, the pulpit, and the duty of christian men. Before and during the American revolution, there was much more political discussion in the pulpit than there is now, or perhaps than there has ever been elsewhere. Indeed the great questions of the revolution were all discussed in the pulpit and with signal ability. As some writer has said, "The pulpit thundered and lightened on the subject of liberty." The consequence was the true ideas of liberty were understood, and came to have a living development in the public mind. The tallest statesmen of the land heard the gospel of liberty proclaimed from the sacred desk. Who needs be told that ministers then met their responsibilities to the state and to the public weal, fearlessly and boldly? Who does not know that all these questions were then blended with prayer, and civil liberty was hailed as a boon from heaven?

But ministers in our day have become afraid to stand forth and speak as honest, fearless men on this subject, and political men have become fearful and sensitive lest the pulpit should utter its voice for freedom. But why this sensitiveness of politicians? And why this timidity in the heralds of the gospel? Have not all Christian men political duties to perform? Ought they not to search out these duties, and settle in the fear of God all the great questions they involve, and then meet their political responsibilities in the fear of God and for the welfare of the nation?

It is not generally considered that neither of the two great political parties can manage this question of slavery at their option. It is a great blessing to have two great parties. They correct each other's errors, watch each other's movements, and if either party should swerve essentially from the right path, the good men of this swerving party would go over to the other, and quickly turn the scale.

At the South, both parties are united on the subject of slavery, and will not for a moment diverge from the line of strictest fidelity to its interests. Each of the two great parties have, or rather had their other issues; now all other issues have fallen into comparative insignificance, and the matter of controversy between them turns no longer upon principles, but upon men, and the spoils of office. But the thing I would say is, that neither of them can control the subject of slavery. Hence when the united South take their stand firmly, and irrespective of party, say--"So far will we go and no farther," then each party must meet them on their own ground, or lose their support, and with it all chances of success as a party.

Both parties therefore concede to the South all they ask. For example, they both accede to the Compromise acts, Fugitive law included, and affirm this law to be "a finality." This done, they cry, Drop the question of slavery--let all be quiet as the grave on this point, and let us each carry our other questions if we can. This is just the issue now made. Drop the question of slavery, and no longer make it in any degree a political issue. This is the demand first of the whole South; next, of the two great political parties. Shall the Christian church accede to this? Shall we let this entire subject alone, and go in for contention of the other issues as if they had any importance worth naming in the comparison?

Until matters assumed their present form, a multitude of Christians acted conscientiously with one or the other of these great parties. Both of these parties have promised Anti-Slavery men pretty largely. For

example, the Whig party promised to keep out Texas, and to prevent a war with Mexico; and many did believe, honestly too, that one party or the other would do something to withdraw the support of the general government from slavery. So long as they could reasonably indulge this hope, and honestly did so, I cannot condemn these Christians for their adherence to their parties. Many conscientious men thought that they could do most good in that course, and hence we ought not to complain of them for it.

But now it is not so much as pretended that any good results will ensue from acting with either of the great parties. Not even a bait is now held out to allure conscientious and good men into their support. Nobody contends that under the control of either of these great parties, there is, at present, the faintest hope of repealing or even modifying the Fugitive Slave Bill, or getting one good thing for truth or righteousness. Therefore I ask, can any good man hold on to either of those parties--for no good object whatever--not even the promise of any good to the cause of the slave being held out as an inducement?

So of the church. Of old it was often said, What have we to do with slavery? Men did not see that Congress had any particular responsibility on this subject, and hence they could not see that as Christian men, or as a church, they could have any special responsibility in regard to slavery. But now the world are saying, What are ye Christians doing? Are you with us in the support of our great party? O yes. Now this may please the men of the world, but it certainly can never secure their respect. It never can do honor to the firmness of Christian principle. Do you ask, What ought Christian men to do? Doubtless they ought to use all their legitimate influence against the Fugitive Slave Bill, and against all the political aggressions of slavery upon our free land and government. Doubtless they ought to vote for freedom as against slavery, and speak out in no mistakable words and tones, till the nation shall hear and shall purge itself from all national patronage of this horrible system.

The same should be said of the responsibilities and duties of the great benevolent societies. Time was when great ignorance prevailed in these societies, touching their relations to slavery. When I entered the ministry, not a word was said about the relations of the American Board to slavery, or of the Bible Society, or the Tract Society. But ere long the question came up in regard to the relations sustained by each of those societies to slavery. The Christian public ask, What is the true position which those societies sustain towards slavery? What is their duty? What are they in fact doing? Does their influence go to sustain the foul system? They all claim to be disseminating a pure Christianity, and of course they profess to bear a pure testimony against every sin, and especially against all great public iniquities. Are they in fact doing so? They should consider that increased light begets augmented responsibilities, and that they cannot pass along now, treating slavery as if it were no sin--however conveniently they might have done so in those times of ignorance which God winked at. There is too much light now on the sin of slavery, and on its multiform relations to the church and to the nation, to admit of neutrality in regard to it, or to allow the assumption that it is not to be regarded as a great sin.

III. What is implied in repentance?

Repentance is turning the heart to God, and abandoning selfishness. The work of repentance belongs to the heart or will. Of course it must be the function of the voluntary or moral department of the mind's powers.

But especially let me remark, that where repentance is genuine, there will be and must be external reformation. Men may have emotions of sorrow, with no change of purpose; but this is not real repentance.

IV. Why should men now repent and reform?

Because as soon as we get light on any former practice which shows us that it is opposed to God's will, we cannot persist in it without greatly augmented guilt. For example, the case of intemperance. As soon as increasing light on this subject showed the extent of its mischiefs, and the absence of any and all redeeming good, the practice of using intoxicating drink as a beverage came to be seen at once as the murder of a man's own body and soul, and as a fatal temptation to his neighbor. Then, how could any man persist longer in its use without damning sin?

So of slavery. As soon as light prevails on this subject, men can no longer go on in the same course of sustaining the system, without the greatest guilt. It will not answer to substitute evasions, and dodging and side issues in place of real repentance and true reform. To evade the claims of truth thus serves not to acquit the soul before God or man, but only to strengthen depravity and harden the heart.

For an illustration of this principle take the case of the Jews. Before Christ came among them, great moral darkness reigned. When Christ came among them, preaching the kingdom of God and illustrating its true import in his life and spirit, in his miracles of goodness and finally in his death on the cross, they could not but "see a great light." Therefore, when they resisted this light, and resorted to their lies to evade the evidence furnished by his resurrection, their consciences became exceedingly hardened. After all this light, could they go on rejecting their known Messiah without greatly augmented guilt? Nay, verily. The same principle applies to the nation as a whole, and to all its individual members before whom this gospel light shone.

Refusal to repent when light reveals sin and duty, must hasten the destruction of any nation or people under heaven. How long did the Jews continue to prosper after Christ had come and had been rejected? Terrible was their hardening under so much light, and equally fearful was their doom! History records no case of more fearful destruction, or of more black and inexcusable guilt. When the hour of their retribution at last came, God poured out the cup of his indignation upon them without mixture, and bitterly did they drink it to its dregs! So must it be with every nation that shall refuse to repent when light breaks in and duty stands revealed, and yet they refuse to do it.

The governments of the earth, if they resist the light that breaks in upon them, are sure to be destroyed. Who has not looked with admiration upon the English government, and marked its course when pressed by public sentiment to adopt demanded reforms? Their history for centuries is a series of triumphs achieved by the growing intelligence, firmness and wisdom of the people, calling for reforms in government or in the social condition of the masses. We can all of us remember the agitation long and deep which preceded the glorious act of West India emancipation. If the government had withstood that appeal and refused to emancipate, I believe the refusal must have crushed the very throne itself. The people demanded the reform. The pulpit thundered and lightened--the whole public mind rocked as with the upheavings of an earthquake. The only safety lay in yielding to their demands.

No Christian nation since the world began has been able to stand against the united prayers and testimony of God's church. No one has had strength to resist any reform which God's people have unitedly demanded. If they were seriously to determine on resistance, they would find God himself arrayed against them. O how would He drive his judgment-chariot, axle-deep in their blood and bones! Let his people stand on his side and do his work;--they may expect his interposing arm for their support, crowning their toils with glorious victory. This must be so, by a law as undeviating and unfailing as the veracity of

Jehovah!

This principle applies to all organizations, benevolent or ecclesiastical. If they resist reform when growing light demands it, God will be against them, and his chariot will grind them to powder! What does he want of a church or a benevolent society that resists reform when light and truth demand it, and sets itself in array against the progress of his cause? He knows how to use them for beacons of warning if they refuse to be used as instruments of progress in doing good. Therefore if any people or associate body will not receive and obey the light, their ruin is sure. The best of all possible reasons for repentance is, that it is God's good pleasure. What! if the expression of God's will--if the manifestation of his wishes to this effect cannot move men to repent, what can? What would you think of a child who should say, "No matter what my parents think--who cares for their feelings or their wishes? It is no reason at all for my conduct that my father or mother desire me to do as they say." What, I ask, would you think of such a child? Can anything be more monstrous than such a trampling underfoot of the most tender and sacred obligations?

Is it then no reason for you who are before me here to-day that God now commands you all to repent? Nay, more, that with tenderness he invites and entreats, and cries out, "How can I give thee up?"

REMARKS.

1. When light breaks in upon men, it is awful, and even terrifying if they only resist and rebel against it, gathering up their utmost strength like the ancient Jews, to oppose the claims of truth and of God. This is true of governments when they resist the light, oppose reform, and raise for odium's sake the senseless cry, fanaticism! FANATICISM!

2. But the occasion calls on me to apply these principles to the course pursued by some of the great benevolent societies of the day. We wait to know what they have done and are doing in regard to the great reforms of modern times. The American Tract Society is a great organization acting under a charter which allows them to publish only such matter as is approved by a publishing committee composed of six men, one from each of six leading evangelical denominations. All these are Northern men now, and I believe have always been so. If we inquire for the special circumstances under which they now act, we find that since the agitation of the slavery question at the North, the people of the South have become exceedingly sensitive lest some Anti-Slavery truth should come in among them in Northern books, and thus reach their slaves. They became jealous of the entire mass of Northern literature. The Tract Society, dreading to incur their jealousy, and anxious to make their publications acceptable to Southern people, have been in the practice of expunging Anti-Slavery sentiments wherever found in the volumes they thought best to publish. A great many choice books came before them, too valuable to be discarded, and yet some few pages or paragraphs of an Anti-Slavery truth raised a question which they met by expunging the passages. At first they did this without giving the public any notice of the fact. But when the fact came to be known, it was felt by very many to be great injustice to the authors and a fraud upon the public. They became alarmed and protested against the course. They exposed the obvious error of the Tract Society in mutilating books without giving notice of the fact. The result has been that the Tract Society were compelled to modify their course, so far as to advertise the public of the omissions they had made, whether the subject were baptism, slavery, or any other moral or religious question. But in one important respect they have continued on as before. They have taken particular pains to strike out every Anti-Slavery sentiment, whether in psalms and hymns, or in any other books.

Now some have stigmatized the Tract Society's committee as Pro-Slavery, but I do not believe they are Pro-Slavery in the sense of aiming to sustain slavery. They aim I suppose to be neutral on this question, and especially they mean to print nothing which would offend the people of the South or their Northern friends. This I take to be their policy. I believe it to be a wicked policy, but I do not know that they sin in pursuing it. They may think they are doing God service.

But I need not pursue this subject farther. The policy is one which we do not approve, which no good man ought to approve, but it is one which prevails in a great many of the pulpits in our country--I cannot say to their honor, or to the augmentation of their moral power.

3. What shall we do with men who being enlightened upon their duty, do not repent? By one who spoke in behalf of the Tract Society, you have been warned to be on your guard against the force of the sentiment of justice, and perhaps not without some occasion. Many are ready to cry out for fire to come down from heaven upon the men who seem not to keep pace with the demands of truth. But this is never the best way to reform abuses and bring sinners to repentance. God acts on the principle of the greatest possible forbearance. He forbears as long as He wisely can. He beseeches and entreats, and thus labors to secure the desired repentance and reform.

What then shall we do with offending nations, and with our own government when they impose upon us fugitive laws? Of course we are to set about their reformation. Do you ask, how? The way is open. The Christian church has it in her power to reform this nation. She has long held the balance of political power, and she holds it still. Let all christian men say, "We will not sustain slavery; the men who are in league with it cannot have our votes."--and the thing would be done. Let all Christian voters be united in this, and they could just as certainly elect the man of their choice as there should be another election. Let them try it. They have the consciences of men on their side, and they would find strength and help rising up where they did not expect it. If they did not succeed in the next election, they surely would succeed soon. Ere another election came round, politicians would say, "We must honor and please the church," just as they now say, "We must honor the South."

But the way to do this is not to turn slaveholders ourselves, and force our opinions down men's throats, and cast them from the church if they do not vote our ticket. The right way is to enlightenment on the subject--to treat them kindly and yet with great fidelity, and to try to bring them over to the truth and the right by reasoning and persuasion. Substantially we should pursue the same methods of labor and influence that we adopt when we would change men's position on any moral question, --the same as when we would convert sinners from sin to God.

In regard now to the Tract Society, shall I excommunicate them all at once? Would this avail anything? Shall we not rather attempt to persuade them as to what we think their duty? Shall we not try to convince them of the great mistake in their policy? What right have we to excommunicate them until we have expostulated?

But some of you say this has been done already. I ask if it has been done both kindly and earnestly, and with all the perseverance that the case demands?

But again the question returns, what shall be done by the church to abolish slavery? I answer, Let all her organizations speak out with decision and firmness. Let the Congregational Conference recently organized in Ohio take their stand and bear their solemn and earnest testimony. Let them send a commission bearing their fraternal exhortations to other bodies of Congregationalists--to Iowa--to

Wisconsin--to New England,--wherever they can gain a hearing. But let us not cast off and condemn the Tract Society without a hearing. Who does not believe that it is in the power of the great Christian organizations of our country to reform that society?

4. There is another society formed for the dissemination of moral truth in its due proportions, not avoiding its bearings on the great sins of the times. No one can deny that it is always right to supply any defects in the labors and influence of the great American societies by constituting another society to do the whole work, as it should be done. This is one of the proper means to correct the evils of which we complain. We can support the new society, and this will be of itself a testimony against the objectionable course of the old. Hence if I were to give anything to the old, I would give much more to the new, both because I would have my donations bear a testimony for righteous principles, and because the new society will have for some time yet to come, few friends and patrons, while the old will have many.

5. Another question is often asked, which has an important bearing upon the subject of church communion. Shall we commune with an offending brother while we are laboring with him to reclaim him from his sin?

In my view the answer depends upon his relations as an arraigned man. I must make no man a sinner by construction. I must not assume that he is wrong, but wait for the proof of the fact. The common doctrine of law and justice is that I must assume my brother to be innocent until he is proved to be guilty. On this principle, the question of treatment should obviously be determined, embracing, of course, the question of church communion.

6. It is always wise to avail ourselves of the admissions of our opponents. If on the question of Slavery they concede that all good Northern men abhor it, let us admit and use this concession. It will be a powerful weapon in our hands.

7. It is always impolitic to represent our opponents to be farther from us than they really are. For example, it would be the height of folly for me to say--The whole North American Church is for Slavery, defending and sustaining the system. If this were true, how greatly would the fact relieve the conscience of the South! Slaveholders would surely feel that the Christian sentiment of all those who were in a situation to judge in the case is in their favor. And if the fact were not true, it were much better I should not affirm it to be so. My affirming it will have much the same influence on Southern mind that the actual truth would have. Let me take care how I represent the church to be more in favor of Slavery than she is. Rather let us say, if the facts will sustain us in it, that we, Christian men of the North, are all agreed that Slavery is a great sin.

8. But there is yet another reason for the largest charity towards our Northern brethren. The want of charity serves to provoke rather than to convince or to convert. Suppose I meet a Northern brother, and accuse him of being pro-slavery, and try to make him a slaveholder by construction. If his judgment is not carried by the obvious justice of the charge, I am doing him to good. If he thinks himself innocent, he will of course feel himself wronged, and all my efforts with him are worse than useless.

Uncharitable measures never succeed. If even the Apostles, with all their miracles and tongues, had gone out with a bad spirit, they must have labored in vain. God suffers his own cause to experience a temporary defeat, rather than give success to men of a bad spirit. I have no doubt that in many cases the anti-slavery cause has been thrown aback by the bad spirit of its advocates. If we have erred in this matter, we must repent. We can never hope for the blessing of God until we do.

Before I went to the Mediterranean, I had taken the stand in my congregation in New York city that no slaveholder could come to our communion. In that vast congregation some slaveholders of professed piety were almost always present, and the rebuke was being solemnly felt. The example was exerting a decidedly good influence. But when I came back, I soon found that a strange state of things had come about. Everything was hot and fiery. I felt bound to tell them plainly that they were casting out devils through Beelzebub, and by getting his spirit were really doing his work. This would never do. The cause of love and of human well-being could not be built up by uncharitableness and hate.

If, now, our General Government needs reform, (of which I have no doubt,) then let us forthwith employ all constitutional means and measures for its reform. Of the wisdom of doing all this no one can for a moment doubt.

So of the Tract Society; they have done good; let them have all due honor for what good they have done. Some of you may have been converted through the agency of their publications and labors. I cannot say that any man of you is a hypocrite because I find you giving your money and your prayers to the Tract Society. If you choose to give to that Society, do so. The opportunity will be afforded to every man to give to whichever Society he pleases.

As for voting for either of the two great party candidates, on a strongly pro-slavery platform, that question is in my mind easily settled. I can do no such thing. Sooner shall I cut off my own right hand than suffer it to drop a vote for such men, standing on such platforms.

It would be interesting and useful too, if there were time, to show how all great reforms naturally throw men into three great classes, viz. the Conservatives, the Radicals, and the Moderates. It were easy to show the philosophy of this classification, and how it results from the laws of mind and the action of men in society. It were still more important to inquire what are the mutual duties of these three classes towards each other. Scarce any topic more needs to be discussed and well understood at the present time. But my hour is more than spent now, and I must not enlarge.

In some respects I am sorry, and in some respects I am not sorry to be called on to say so much on this subject of slavery--its issues, and the duties of Christians in regard to it. There is the greatest need that these things should be investigated and well considered. The public mind will and must act on these questions, and the action taken is continually affecting the honor of Christianity and the welfare of the church and of souls, most fundamentally. It cannot, therefore, be amiss to bring this subject into the pulpit. Let it engage your serious attention, and move your hearts to seek divine wisdom in prayer.

My only regret to occupy your time on this subject lies in the fact that so many among us are all wrong, and need to be urged to-day to repent of all sin and yield up their hearts at once and forever to the service and fear of the Lord their God. For them I fear it may be an evil to have their attention diverted, even for one Sabbath, from those great things that pertain to their present and everlasting peace.

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