

Heart Condemnation, a Proof That God Also Condemns

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of conscience in our relationship with God and the dangers of self-deception regarding our moral state.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23, James 2:10, 1 John 3:20

Topics: "Conscience", "Acceptance with God"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the critical role of conscience in determining our acceptance with God, explaining that a condemning heart indicates a deeper spiritual issue. He clarifies that conscience is not merely a feeling but a rational faculty that discerns right from wrong, and warns against the dangers of ignoring its voice. Finney stresses that if our conscience condemns us in any area, it reflects a broader disapproval from God, as true acceptance requires a clear conscience. He urges listeners to examine their hearts honestly, recognizing that a lack of peace with God often stems from unacknowledged sin. Ultimately, he calls for a deep introspection to ensure one's heart aligns with God's will, as self-deception can lead to spiritual peril.

Transcript

""For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things."--1 John 3:20

Our text suggests as our leading subject of investigation, the CONDITION OF OUR ACCEPTANCE WITH GOD. It implies that if our heart condemn us, God will much more condemn us, being greater than our heart, and knowing all our evil things, a part only of which are distinctly noticed and remembered by ourselves.

In discussing this subject, I shall,

I. TO AVOID MISTAKES, SHOW WHAT IS NOT IMPLIED IN OUR HEART'S CONDEMNING US;

II. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN OUR HEART'S CONDEMNING US;

III. SHOW WHAT IS NOT IMPLIED IN THE LAST CLAUSE OF THE TEXT; "GOD IS GREATER THAN OUR HEARTS AND KNOWETH ALL THINGS."

IV. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN THIS LANGUAGE.

I. It is obvious that the term "heart" as here used is synonymous with conscience. The term is not used as it is frequently elsewhere in the Bible in passages where moral character is predicated of it, in which cases it plain means the will, that is, the voluntary and moral power. In our text it evidently means, the conscience, that power or faculty which approves or condemns our own moral acts and states of mind.

In reference to conscience it seems important to remark that it is not a mere feeling of any kind. Persons not unfrequently confound remorse, or a feeling of pungent sorrow, with conscience; and hence if they feel no remorse, no painful self-accusation, they say and really think that they have no conscience in reference to those points. Thus they quite overlook the fact that conscience may really condemn, and yet they may care so little for its condemnation that it shall occasion no painful emotions, no agony of feeling.

In fact such persons are in a great mistake, for they entirely misapprehend the true nature of conscience. Conscience is not a function of the sensibility as they seem to suppose, but of the reason. Its province is to apprehend intuitively the relations of right and wrong; and not directly to create either pain or pleasure. It is indeed true that in every well balanced and unperverted mind, pain and pleasure do accompany the decisions of conscience; pain its condemnation and pleasure its approval. Yet these are only secondary and not primary results of its action. The mind may come into such a state that no pain shall follow the most deliberate and aggravated violation of conscience.

This fact, it should be well considered, by no means proves that the individual has no conscience on those subjects, nor that his conscience does not disapprove his actions. So far as I have observed this mistake is very common, and certainly, wherever it exists, is very injurious and often fatal. It ought to be well understood that conscience does often condemn although no painful feelings of remorse ensue, because the man is so hardened that his sensibility is in a state of torpor. In this state he may imagine that his conscience approves, or at least does not condemn him;--a mistake of most dangerous nature.

Again, a condemning conscience does not necessarily imply that state of mind commonly called conviction of sin. The difference between the two turns mainly upon the greater degree of thought, reflection, and consideration which belongs to the latter. Conscience may condemn us without our reflecting upon the nature of our conduct and deliberately comparing it with God's revealed law. But conviction is thoughtful. A convicted state implies that the individual is thinking and has thought upon his own guilt; that he turns the subject over and over in his mind and compares it with the demands of God's righteous law. Herein lies an important distinction between a state of real conviction for sin, and a state in which there exists only the tacit condemnation of conscience.

Indeed it seems to be the fact that in a great majority of cases, when the conscience condemns a man he is not conscious at the time of thinking deliberately on the subject. His reason tacitly assumes that he is wrong, without his being conscious at the time of making such an assumption;--that is, he does not think at all of the assumption, and consequently is unconscious that he makes it; but that he really does make such an assumption may be evident in various ways; for example, he may condemn another for doing what he does himself, and this would show that he knows the rule and knows that his violation of it is wrong.-- He notices this wrong in others but does not notice it in himself; and yet the reason all the time silently assumes and knows that the course he is taking is wrong.

As an illustration of this; a man may be selfish; his conscience may silently assume that he is wrong, and so certain may he be at the bottom of his mind that he is wrong that if he should be told and should know

with certainty that he should die in five minutes, he would discover in a moment that he is not prepared to die, but is in his sins, and is altogether wrong in his moral state before God.

Every person will see that this is the process of the mind in respect to conscience if he will notice the operations of his own. Let him also consider how often a person may know himself to be wrong without being distinctly conscious that he knows it. Every one should make the difference between knowing an act or state of his own to be wrong, and being conscious of the fact that he knows it.

Hence we see that our conscience may condemn us when we are not conscious of its condemning sentence. We fail of being thus conscious, however, not because its decisions are in their nature occult, not appearing at all upon the field of consciousness;--but because we feel so little interest in its decisions as not to notice them when they are made.

II. If our conscience condemns us, we shall not have the present evidence of pleasing God. The sweet consciousness that we are accepted of God will be wanting.

On this point it is important to distinguish between being sure we do not please God, and not being sure that we do. The clear, present evidence of pleasing God is lacking in both of these states; though in the latter the individual may not be conscious that his state does displease God. But even he lacks the present consciousness of pleasing God--the clear testimony of his conscience approving his own state.

Again, it of course implies being conscious of not having the decided approval of conscience. Persons are often in a state in which they feel no approval of conscience, and are not sensible of any disapproval.

Again, our heart's condemning us implies a perhaps unnoticed assumption that all is not right between the soul and God. This is often assumed, as has been said, without the mind's taking notice enough of it to fasten the truth thoroughly on the mind.

For example, suppose a man is suddenly arrested by the prospect of death just before him. It may be that this prospect will waken up his mind to see that his heart is by no means right with God. All previous decisions of his conscience to this effect have been unnoticed;--now all suddenly they start forth upon the field of distinct consciousness and the man sees and knows with the clearness of mid-day brightness that his soul is utterly condemned before God. He might have known the same thing before, but he did not care enough to notice the affirmations of his own conscience.

Careless sinners often live in such a way that they think they are in the main prepared to die; but let them for once see that they certainly shall die, and their view of their case may be suddenly and utterly changed. Before this, they may have seemed to be in a certain sense honest: but let them come to this last, decisive test--to this really honest hour, and a new aspect may come over their former apparent honesty.

Suppose I sit down to converse with a man, and say to him--Friend, are you prepared to die? I think so, he says, indeed I suppose so. He seems honest perhaps. Now let him be seized with a fit--not affecting his reason, and let him know that in a few hours he must die. He wails out in agony of soul--"O my God, have mercy on me, for I am utterly unprepared to die."

Now what does this change in his views on this point reveal? Plainly this,--that all along he had not been prepared to die, and that his conscience had condemned him; but he did not come to its light--did not listen to its condemning voice.

Hence we see that it is of the greatest importance that men should get at the deepest convictions of their conscience--those inner convictions that will spring out upon the field of most distinct and vivid consciousness in the honest hour of approaching death. Let all living men be awake to this danger lest they fatally deceive themselves by taking up the mere floating thoughts of a careless hour as the testimony of their conscience to their real state before God.

Again, persons often attempt to pray, and the conviction comes over their mind that they can get no access to God. They find it impossible to expect that God will hear them. They know they shall not have the blessing they ask for. They have not by any means the same confidence of obtaining the blessing as I should have of getting a dollar if any honest man had promised it. Suppose I had promised a student here a dollar if he would call on me for it. I tell him to come to my study at such a time and that I have the money ready for him;--would he not expect it? Would he have any doubt? Would he find it impossible to have faith that he should realize his money on fulfilling the conditions?

Now what is the reason men will not believe God? If you will get at this, you will learn something of the utmost importance to you to know. But to learn it you must let your enquires go down into the bottom of your heart. There you will find the conviction that you are not in a state of acceptance with God.

Have not many of you, brethren and sisters, had such an experience as this;--You have gone to the Lord in prayer to ask for things that you really needed; but your inward frame, your state of heart is such and your life too that you know you cannot honestly expect he will hear you. You go to the throne of grace and kneel down for prayer;--but you dare not, and cannot expect he will answer you. You may indeed sometimes go so carelessly as not to be aware of your state before God; but when you awake sufficiently to consider your own state, and look at all after the probability of being heard, you find you have none at all, for the reason that your own heart condemns you altogether as not being right with God.

Again, when our conscience condemns us in any one thing, God does not accept us in any thing. It is impossible that our heart should be wrong in one thing and right on another at the same time. If conscience condemns in one thing, it does really for the time being in every thing. It condemns us as not right before God, and shows conclusively that we are radically wrong. For the word of God has definitely decided that "whosoever shall keep the whole law and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." This cannot mean less than that he who offends in one point shows himself to have the spirit of disobedience, and shows that of course the law must utterly condemn his moral state of mind. The decisions of conscience harmonize with this.

Some persons are prone to regard this as a hard saying, and are sorely averse to admitting its truth. They know that conscience condemns them in some particular things, for they feel a stinging remorse in view of them; but since they feel no such remorse in reference to other things, they suppose that in the latter their conscience is clear. But if they have good reasons to feel remorse for some things, they may know that if they were to go down to the bottom and see the real state of their hearts, they would find themselves condemned universally.

Again, if our conscience condemns us, we may know that in the deepest conviction of our own minds we are not honest before God. A man may not see, on the broad face of his own consciousness, that he is dishonest; but if his conscience does not really condemn him in one thing he may rest assured that he has no well-grounded confidence of being really honest before God. Let the inner voice of his own conscience be heard, and it will tell him so.

Again, conscience condemns us when, though we do not see any thing outward that is wrong; yet we are not conscious of being inwardly right with God. We may think ourselves very right indeed in our external morality, and yet we may know very well that we are not right in regard to zeal, faith and love--not right in our state of mind towards our enemies--not right in our sympathy with Christ for the salvation of a dying world.

Now when our conscience really condemns us in one of these latter things, we may know that all is not right; indeed we may know that nothing is really right as seen and estimated by a holy God.

It is remarkable how often men think they are right in some things though they know they are wrong in many other things at the same time. For example, a merchant may think that in his trade he is right, and has a right heart altogether. He thinks he is honest, accommodating, and perfectly honorable in his business transactions. Yet he knows that he does not feel for the souls of his customers--does not love their souls, and really seek for their best spiritual good. Oh, he is little aware how much he wrongs his neighbor by not having this love for his soul, and by consequently withholding all proper care and effort for his spiritual good. He might far better, if the thing were possible, save his neighbor's soul, and yet rob him at his counter of every dollar of his money, then give him all his just coppers, but withhold from him all just sympathy, care and effort for his soul's salvation.

Yet how often does such a merchant say--I have a conscience void of offence in my business affairs; I deal in perfect honesty with all men, and no man ever accuses me of wrong;--and yet you know you have not a clear conscience in respect to their souls; you know you do not love them and pray for them, and honestly labor to bring them to real salvation.

Just so in all the common relations of life. I have mentioned the case of the merchant only to illustrate the principle; not because it applied in his case only, or in his case more frequently than in any other. The mechanic who works for other men in his appropriate business does his work well and according to contract and expectation;--now, he says, he has a conscience void of offence. But has he indeed? Has he? Has he done all his duty to the man's soul? Has he done even any part of this branch of his duty? Will his conscience rise up and say, Well done! Will you say--I have done my work well, and what have I more to do? So much, and so far is in itself right; but is this all? Have you no other responsibilities?

Besides, even that you did not do from love to his soul; nor from regard to the just demands of your conscience, or of your God. How very far then are you from having answered the proper demands of an enlightened conscience!

But I must pass to speak,

III. Of what is not implied in the last clause of the text; "God is greater than our hearts and knoweth all things."

It does not imply that God of course justifies us if we justify ourselves. This cannot be implied, for if it were, then must God justify some of the most wicked men on earth.

Nor again is it implied that God condemns us, if we really live up to and according to all the light we have. It would militate against every feature in the character of God to suppose this to be the case.

IV. We are to state, lastly, what is implied in this clause of our text.

It implies that God often sees wrong in us when we do not notice it ourselves. "God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things." We know but little in the sense of being conscious of our knowledges, and may fail to notice many of the evil things in our spirit, temper, heart and life; but God knows them all; and hence may condemn where we do not.

It is also implied that if we are not clear that we are right, God does not accept us. If we see good reason apparently to doubt, we have great reason to presume that God sees abundant reasons to condemn. How can God believe that we are right, if we do not believe it ourselves?

Again, if in anything, we can see that we are not right, God sees that we are right in nothing, but are for the time being wrong in every thing. He sees that we are not conformed to his will heartily in any thing. This seems to follow conclusively from the remarks we have made and the points we have adduced already.

REMARKS.

1. Many see that they are wrong in some things, and yet upon the whole imagine that they are acceptable before God. They notice the fact that conscience does condemn them, but they flatter themselves that these particular things are exceptions to their general conduct.

This is a very common case, yet nothing can be more dangerous, or more delusive. It is throughout and utterly a deep delusion. You are entirely deceived if you think you are right in the main, while in any particular thing whatever, you know that you indulge in transgression. There can be no such thing. It is impossible there should be a right state of heart as to obedience to God while you can allow yourself in some particular form of sin.

2. Some will not admit the conviction of being themselves wholly wrong, although they know themselves to be wrong in some things. The longer I live and hear persons converse the more I am satisfied that many would yield up their hopes at once if they would only admit that they are in truth wholly wrong, and that this must be the case because they do in fact indulge themselves in some things which their conscience condemns. Indeed there can be as I think no doubt that their hope rests not on the conviction that they honestly seek to do God's will in all things, but on the belief that they mean to do right in some things, while they know they do not in fact obey, and honestly seek to obey in all things. Their hope rests on a little supposed good; while in fact some admitted evil ought to banish their hopes forever. And yet they hold on to their hopes as if their salvation depended not on faith in Christ, but on faith in their old hope. Often are they to be seen indulging in that evasive state of mind in which the conviction is struggling to come forth that all is wrong with them, but they resist it and will not give it scope for even a fair examination.

Some who are now in this state of mind were once really converted. Once they knew what it is to have that peace of God which passes all understanding.--They lay down at night absorbed in the love of God, and awoke in the morning to renew his praises. Then they knew the prevalence of prayer; but now they have lost their power with the Lord. They may not know clearly the point where they departed from the Lord, but the fact of grievous backsliding is most obvious, to all but themselves. They are so blind and have so much deep spiritual apathy that they do not perceive how far and how fearfully they have fallen! They think, or at least seem to think that all is fair and about right with them, although they see very plainly that if they make religious visits, or pray, they have no power with either God or man. Yet they will not ascribe this lack of power to the fact that they are really fallen from being right with God. Such persons should read the epistles sent to the seven churches of Asia. They should study those epistles thoroughly and with

much prayer, and mark the traits of character which distinguished those of them that were sorely backslidden. Then they should also observe the counsel given by our Lord to those who had forsaken him and were puffed up with pride. Mark how he shows them that they are really poor and wretched, blind and naked.

3. Others have the conviction pretty thoroughly lodged in their minds that they are wrong, but they hide it as much as they can from both themselves and their neighbors. I have known wives who would for years conceal from their pious husbands the fact that they knew they were not Christians. Sometimes they will continue in this state till their souls are wrung with such unutterable anguish that they are compelled to come out and break down in humiliating confessions.

I once knew a most striking case in the city of New York. A deacon from another church came to our meeting. For a long time, he had been anxious about himself, full of apprehension that he was not right, and yet so proud that he would not make his fears about himself known to others. His wife was an active and ardent-souled Christian. Inasmuch as he had sought for years to maintain in her view a fair reputation for piety, and withal thought much of her good opinion, he could not endure that she should know his present conviction. So dreadfully did this matter agitate his mind and so fearfully did his pride of heart rise up that as he afterwards told us, he was often tempted to take her life to save himself the mortification of disclosing his real character to her eye. At length he came one evening to our meeting and left at its close under horrible convictions, his soul writhing in agony. All the way home his wife continued talking to him about the sermon, delighted herself with such searching truth. He came home, all the way making up his mind that when he reached home, he would at least take his horsewhip and flog his wife! He entered the house, walked the room; was just stepping up to reach his whip for the purpose when his heart smote him so horribly that his hand fell; he dropped on his knees; confessed his horrible purpose; opened all the rottenness of his heart; cast himself at her feet and told her what a hypocrite he had been; and in short utterly broke down and became a new man in Christ Jesus.

How can such persons ever get into the kingdom of heaven with such satanic pride?

4. It sometimes happens that such persons are too proud to confess their sins freely even to God. Before Him, even, they will say; "If I am wrong, I pray to be forgiven"--whereas if they were truly honest, they would say--"O Lord, I know I am altogether wrong." But they will not even confess to God;--how much less to their neighbors!

5. Many are so taken up with looking at their own outward conduct that they do not look narrowly into their own hearts. They seem to suppose that if the outward man is all right, the inner man is right of course.

Now, brethren, suppose conscience be questioned respecting your real state of heart. I do not ask whether you live in outward, open sin; I do not ask whether your conduct tramples on civil law, or on the external proprieties of a Christian life; I presume it does not; but let us come and call for an examination of the inner man. Let us call up conscience to the bar, and say--Conscience, are you satisfied with the state of that heart? Are you satisfied that God is as much loved, adored, believed in, and served as he should be? Are you satisfied that all is right towards God? And still further, are you satisfied that this mind is in a right state towards all the brethren? Is there real, genuine, warm-hearted brotherly love? How have you found the facts to be touching this point?

And now before I close, I have one request to make. It is that when you retire from this place, you would go by yourself and solemnly, honestly, question your conscience. Make the questioning patient and

thorough. Say, "O my conscience, are you satisfied with my state before God? Can you approve it, in view of the light I have had, or could have had, of God's holy law and hence of my duty?"

I beseech you to do this without fail. I beg you to do it for my sake,--and for your own sake. Honestly push the question at the tribunal of conscience--"Is my heart right before God?" I will not ask you to look for those loathsome evidences of sin that appear so often among the ungodly. For the present at least, you may leave those points out of the account, and ask for the state of your heart as it stand before the great and holy God! And if when conscience is thus catechised respecting your heart, it condemns you, how much more will God condemn you?

Do you want to know whether you are justified before God? How easy from the point where we now are is it to answer this question. For if your conscience does not justify you, how much less can God?

But if on the other hand, your conscience, in all points approves, then we need to ask, Is your conscience enlightened, honestly dealt with, and does it speak with a firm yet modest tone?

But these points would anticipate the remarks I am to make in the afternoon in speaking upon the two verses next following our text this morning, and of course I shall defer them to that occasion.

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