

How to Change Your Heart

by Charles Finney

To change your heart, you must change the governing preference of your mind by rejecting sin and preferring God and obedience to everything else.

Duration: 40:08

Scripture: Proverbs 29:1, Matthew 6:24, Luke 13:3, Acts 2:37-38, Romans 8:7, Hebrews 9:27, 1 John 3:8

Topics: "Audio Books"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher urges the listeners to cease their rebellion against God and enlist in the service of Jesus Christ. He emphasizes that Jesus has come to destroy the works of the devil and establish the government of God in the hearts of men. The preacher asks if the listeners are willing to allow Jesus to govern the world and if they would obey him themselves. He addresses the concern of being a great sinner and assures that there is mercy available for all. The sermon also discusses the two classes of evidence of a change of heart, which are vivid emotions of love for God, repentance for sin, and faith in Christ. The importance of understanding the philosophy of conversion is highlighted, as many sermons fail to secure the sinner's attention or direct it to irrelevant matters. The preacher encourages the listeners to seize the present moment, while they are awake and strong, to make a new heart and spirit and embrace eternal life.

Transcript

I observe negatively that you cannot change your heart by working your imagination and feelings into a state of excitement. Sinners are apt to suppose that great fears and terrors, great horrors of conscience, and the utmost stretch of excitement that the mind is capable of bearing must necessarily precede a change of heart. They are led to this persuasion by a knowledge that such feelings do often precede this change.

It often happens that sinners will not yield and change their hearts until the Spirit of God has driven them to extremity, until the thunders of Sinai have been rolled in their ears and the lurid fires of hell have been made to flash in their faces. Oh, this is no part of the work of making a new heart, but it is the result of resistance to the performance of this duty. These terrors and alarms are by no means essential to its performance, but are rather an embarrassment and a hindrance.

You cannot change your heart by attempt to force yourself into a certain state of feeling. When sinners are called upon to repent, they give their hearts to God. It is common for them, if they undertake to perform

this duty, to make an effort to feel emotions of love, repentance, and faith.

They seem to think that all religion consists in highly excited emotions or feelings, and that these feelings can be bidden into existence by a direct effort of the will. They spend much time in prayer for certain feelings and make agonizing efforts to call into existence those highly wrought emotions and feelings of love to God, of which they hear Christians speak. But these emotions can never be brought into existence by a direct effort to feel.

They can never be caused to start into existence and glow and burn in the mind at the direct bidding of the will. The will has no direct influence over them and can only bring them into existence through the medium of the attention. Feelings or emotions are dependent upon thought and arise spontaneously in the mind when the thoughts are intensely occupied with their corresponding objects.

Thought is under the control of the will. We can direct our attention and meditations to any subject, and the corresponding emotions will spontaneously arise in the mind. If a hated subject is under consideration, emotions of hatred are felt to arise.

If an object of terror, of grief, or of joy occupies the thoughts, their corresponding emotions will, of course, arise in the mind. Thus, our feelings are only indirectly under the control of the will. They are sinful or holy only as they are thus indirectly bidden into existence by the will.

Voluntariness is indispensable to moral character. It is the universal and irresistible conviction of men that in action to be praised or blameworthy must be free. If in passing through the streets you should see a tile fall from a building upon which men would work and kill a man, and upon inquiry you found it to be the result of accident, you could not feel that there was any murder in the case, but if on the contrary you learned that the tile was maliciously thrown upon the head of the deceased by one of the workmen, you could not resist the conviction that it was murder.

So if God or any other being should force a dagger into your hand and force you against your will to stab your neighbor, the universal conscience would you, but him who forced you to do this deed. So any action or thought or feeling to have moral character must be directly or indirectly under the control of the will. If a man voluntarily place himself under such circumstances as to call wicked emotions into exercise, he is entirely responsible for them.

If he place himself under the circumstances where virtuous emotions are called forth, he is praiseworthy in the exercise of them, precisely in proportion to his voluntariness in bringing his mind into circumstances to cause their existence. I said also that repentance may exist in the mind, either in the form of an emotion or a volition. Repentance properly signifies a change of mind in regard to the nature of sin and does not in its primary signification necessarily include the idea of sorrow.

It is simply an act of will, rejecting sin and choosing or preferring holiness. This is its form when existing as a volition. When existing as an emotion, it sometimes rises into a strong abhorrence of sin and love of holiness.

It often melts away into ingenuous relentings of heart, ingushings of sorrow, and the strongest feelings of disapprobation and self-abhorrence in view of our sins. So faith may exist simply as a settled conviction or persuasion of mind of the truths of revelation and will have greater or less influence according to the strength and permanency of this persuasion. It is not evangelical faith, however, unless this persuasion be

accompanied with the consent of the will to the truth believed.

We often believe things to exist, the very existence of which is hateful to us. Devils and wicked men may have a strong conviction of the truth upon their minds, as we know they often do, and so strong is their persuasion of the truth that they tremble, but they still hate the truth. But when the conviction of gospel truth is accompanied with the consent of the will or the mind's preference of it, it is evangelical faith, and in proportion to its strength will uniformly influence the conduct.

But this is faith existing as a volition. When the objects of faith revealed in the gospel are the subject of intense thought, faith rises into emotion. It is then a felt confidence and trust so sensible as to calm all the anxieties and fears of the soul.

To change your heart, as I have shown in the former discourse and repeated in this, is to change the governing preference of your mind. What is needed is that your will should be rightly influenced, that you should reject sin and prefer God and obedience to everything else. The question is then, how is your will to be thus influenced? By what process is it reasonable to expect thus to influence your mind? Until your will is right, it is vain to expect felt emotions of true love to God, of repentance and faith.

These feelings, after which perhaps you are seeking and into which you are trying to force yourself, need not be expected until the will is bowed, until the preference of the mind is changed. And here you ought to understand that there are three classes of motives that decide the will. First, those that are purely selfish.

Selfishness is the preference of one's own interest and happiness to God and his glory. Whenever the will chooses directly or indirectly under the influence of selfishness, the choice is sinful, for all selfishness is sin. A second class of motives that influence the will are those that arise from self-love.

Self-love is a constitutional dread of misery and love of happiness, and whenever the will is influenced purely by considerations of this kind, its decisions either have no moral character at all, or they are sinful. The constitutional desire of happiness and dread of misery is not in itself sinful, and the consent of the will to lawfully gratify this constitutional love of happiness and dread of misery is not sinful. But when the will consents, as in the case of Adam and Eve, to a prohibited indulgence, it then becomes sinful.

A third class of motives that influence the will are connected with conscience. Conscience is the judgment which the mind forms of the moral qualities of actions. When the will is decided by the voice of conscience or a regard to right, its decisions are virtuous.

When the mind chooses at the bidding of principle, then and only then are its decisions according to the law of God. While in despair, the sinner should flee rather than submit, but the offer of reconciliation annihilates the influence of despair and gives to conscience its utmost power. Instead therefore of waiting for certain feelings or making your present state of mind the subject of attention, please to abstract your thoughts from your present emotions and give your undivided attention to some of the reasons for changing your heart.

Remember, the present object is not to call directly into existence certain emotions, but by leading your mind to a full understanding of your obligations, to induce you to yield to principle and to choose what is right. If you will give your attention, I will try to place before you such considerations to induce the state of mind which constitutes a change of heart. One, fix your mind upon the unreasonableness and hatefulness of selfishness.

Selfishness is the pursuit of one's own happiness as a supreme good, this in itself inconsistent with the glory of God and the highest happiness of his kingdom. You must be sensible that you have always directly or indirectly aimed at promoting your own happiness in all that you have done, that God's glory and happiness and the interests of his kingdom have not been the leading motive of your life, that you have not served God but have served yourself. But your individual happiness is of trifling importance compared with the happiness and glory of God and the interests of his immense kingdom.

To pursue your own happiness is to prefer an infinitely less to an infinitely greater good simply because it is your own. Is this virtue? Is this public spirit? Is this benevolence? Is this loving God supremely or your neighbor as yourself? No, it is exalting your own happiness into the place of God. It is placing yourself as a center of the universe and then attempt to cause God and all his creatures to revolve around you as your satellites.

In the next place, look at the guilt of this. No thanks to you if there is a happiness in the universe. If your example should have its natural influence and not be counteracted by God, it would like a little leaven, leaven the whole lump.

If all your acquaintances copied your example and their acquaintances theirs and so on, you can easily see that your influence would soon destroy all benevolence and introduce universal selfishness and rebellion against God. No thanks to you if there is an individual in the universe that respects the government of God. You have never obeyed it and all your influences have been against it.

And if God had not been constantly wakeful in using counteracting influences, his government had long since been demolished and virtue and obedience and love to God and man had been banished from the world. Now, look at the guilt of this. The guilt of any action is equal to the evils which it has a natural tendency to produce.

Now look at this. Your selfishness has the natural and if unrestrained, the inevitable tendency to ruin the world, to destroy God's government, to establish Satan's and to people hell with all mankind. Next, look at the reasonableness and utility of benevolence.

Benevolence is goodwill. Benevolence to God is preferring his happiness and glory to all created good. Benevolence to man is the exercise of the same regard to and desire for their happiness as we have for our own.

Benevolence to God or the preference of God's happiness and glory is right in itself because his happiness and glory are infinitely the greatest good in the universe. He prefers his own happiness and glory to everything else, not because they are his own, but because they constitute the greatest good. All beings when compared with him are less than nothing and his capacity for enjoying happiness or enduring pain is infinite, not only in duration but in degree.

If all the creatures in the universe were completely happy or perfectly miserable to all eternity, their happiness or misery, though endless in duration, would be but finite in degree. But God's happiness is not only endless in duration but infinite in degree. His happiness is therefore just as much more valuable than that of all his creatures as infinite exceeds finite.

Then is it not right that all his creatures should value this happiness and glory infinitely above their own? Is it not right that he should do this, not because it is his own happiness, but because it is an infinitely greater

good? But again, consider the reasons why God should govern the universe. Perhaps in words or in theory you were never denied his right to govern, yet in practice you have always denied it. Your having never obeyed is the strongest possible declaration of your denial of his right to govern you.

The language of your conduct has been, who is Jehovah that I should obey him? I know not Jehovah, neither will I obey his voice. But have you duly considered his claims upon your obedience? Have you not only admitted the fact that he has a right to govern, but have you understood and thoroughly considered the foundation of this right? Yet, if you have never attended to this, it is not wonderful that you have refused obedience. The foundation of God's right to the government of the universe is made up of the three following considerations.

First, his moral character. His benevolence is infinite. Were he a malevolent being and were his laws like himself, as they would be of course, he could have no right to govern.

Instead of being under an obligation to love and obey him, it would be our duty to hate and disobey him. But his benevolence renders him worthy of our love and obedience. But this benevolence alone cannot qualify him for nor give him a right to the government of the universe.

However benevolent he may be, if his natural attributes are not what they should be, he cannot be qualified to be the supreme ruler of all the worlds. But a glance at his natural attributes will show that he is no less worthy to govern in respect to these than in respect to his moral attributes. At first, he has infinite knowledge so that his benevolence will always be wisely exercised.

Second, he has infinite power. However benevolent he might be, if he lacked either knowledge to direct or power to execute his benevolent desires, he would not be fit to govern. Again, he is omnipresent in every place at every time so that nothing that benevolence desires, wisdom directs, or power can achieve, can be wanting in his administration.

Again, he is immortal and unchangeable. Could he cease to exist or were he subject to change? These would be fundamental defects in his nature as supreme ruler of the universe. But again, neither his moral nor natural attributes when viewed separately or collectively afford sufficient ground for his assuming the reins of government.

For however good and great he may be, these constitute no sufficient reason for his taking upon himself the office of supreme magistrate irrespective of the elective choice of the beings. But he is also the creator and holds by the highest possible tenure the entire universe as his own. Thus, he is not only infinitely well fitted to govern, but by creation has the absolute and inalienable right to govern.

He not only has this right, but it is his duty to govern. He can never yield his office nor throw aside this responsibility. If you are an impenitent sinner, you have never in a single instance obeyed your maker.

Every breath that you have breathed, every pulse you have taken, has but added to the number of your crimes. When God has fanned your heaving lungs, you have breathed out your poisonous breath in rebellion against the eternal God. And how ought God to feel towards you? You have set up your unsanctified feet upon the principles of eternal righteousness.

You have lifted up your hands filled with poisoned weapons against the throne of the Almighty. You have set at naught the authority of God and the rights of man. You have spurned as with your feet every principle of right, of love, and of rational happiness.

You are the enemy of God, the foe of man, a child of the devil and in league with hell. Ought not God then to hate you with all his heart? But in the midst of your rebellion, behold the long-suffering of God. With what patience has he borne with all your aggravated wickedness? All this you have done, and he has kept silence.

Dare you think that he will never reprove? But look for a moment at the conditions of the gospel, repentance, and faith. To repent is to hate and renounce your sin. This requirement is not arbitrary on the part of God.

It would neither be just to the universe nor beneficial to you to exercise pardon until you comply with this requirement. Can a sovereign forgive his subjects while they remain in rebellion? Can God forgive you while you persevere in sin? No. This would be to give up his law and by a public act to confess himself wrong and you right, to renounce the stand he has taken to condemn himself and justify you.

But this would be the publication of falsehood. It would be a proclamation that sin is right and holiness is wrong. Not only so, but to forgive you and leave you in your sin would render your happiness impossible.

You might as well proclaim a man in health who is dying with the plague. But sinner, you have seen in the progress of this discourse the reasonableness of benevolence and the hatefulness of selfishness, the right and the duty of God to govern you and your obligations to obey. You have seen the reasonableness and utility of virtue, the unreasonableness, the guilt and evil of sin, and now what say you? What is your present duty? Is it right? Is it reasonable? Is it expedient, longer to pursue your selfish course? Is it not best and right and manly and honorable and time to turn and obey your maker? Look at the consequences of your present cost to yourself, your friends, over whom you have no influence, to the church and to the world.

Will you continue to cast firebrands, arrows, and death to throw all your influence, your time and talents, your body and soul into the scale of selfishness shall all your influence continue to be upon the wrong side, to increase the wickedness and misery of earth, to gratify the devil and grieve the Son of God? Sinner, if you go to hell, you ought to be willing to go alone. Company will not mitigate but increase your pain. Ought you not then instantly to throw all your influence into the other scale, to exert yourself to roll back the tide of death and save your fellow man from hell? Do you see the reasonableness of this? What is your judgment in the case? Do not stop to look at your emotions, nor turn your eye in upon your present state of mind, but say, will you cease your rebellion, throw down your weapons, and enlist in the service of Jesus Christ? He has come to destroy the works of the devil, to demolish his empire and re-establish the government of God in the hearts of men.

Are you willing that he should govern the world? Is this your choice? If allowed to vote, would you elect him as supreme governor of the world? Would you obey him yourself? But do you reply, oh, I am so great a sinner, I fear there is no mercy for me. That is not the question. The question is not whether he will pardon you, but whether you will obey him.

Now, from this subject, you see why many complain that they cannot submit to God. They do not give their attention to the consideration necessary to lead them to submission. Many occupy their thoughts with their state of feeling, are looking steadily at the darkness of their own minds and the hardness of their own hearts.

They are anxiously waiting for the existence of certain feelings in their mind, which they suppose must precede conversion. In this way, they will not submit, of course. Their mental eyes turned away from the reasons of submission.

In this state of mind, it is impossible that they should submit. It would be a counteraction of all the laws of mind others. Instead of attending to the reasonableness and fitness of their maker's claims, give their whole attention to their own danger and try to submit while they are only influenced by fear.

This is acting under the influence of self-love. It is not responding to the voice of conscience. It is not submission to the laws of right and actuated by such motives.

The mind may struggle till the day of judgment and still the considerations that must lead the soul to a right submission are not before the mind and the soul will not submit. It is the rightness of the duty and not the danger consequent upon the non-performance of it that must influence the mind if it would act virtuously. You see the way in which the Spirit of God operates in the conversion of men.

It is through the medium of attention and conscience he gets and keeps the attention of the mind and through the influence of hope and fear and conscience conducts the sinner along the path of truth till he has given the conscience the requisite information to exert its utmost power that when it gives forth its verdict, the will may respond. Amen. This is the experience of every Christian.

He knows that in this way the Spirit of God exerted its influence to change his heart. He can tell you that his attention was arrested and fixed, that his conscience was enlightened and the subject pressed upon his mind until he was induced to yield. You see the importance of understanding the philosophy of conversion and why it is that so many sermons are lost and worse than lost upon the souls of men.

First the sinner's attention is not secured and secondly if it is secured it is often directed to irrelevant matters and the subject embarrassed with extraneous considerations that have nothing to do with the sinner's immediate duty. Often the subject is not cleared up to his mind or if he understands it he does not see its personal application to himself or if he sees this he is not made to feel the pressure of present obligation and not infrequently oh tell it not in gath. The impression is distinctly left upon his mind that he is unable to do his duty.

The preaching that leaves this last impression is infinitely worse than none. From this subject you can see that there are two classes of evidence of a change of heart. One is these vivid emotions of love to God, repentance for sin, and faith in Christ that often follow the change of choice.

These constitute happiness. They are most sought and usually the most dependent upon but not deservedly the most satisfactory. Highly wrought emotions are liable to deceive for as they cannot be the subject of a present distinct examination without ceasing to exist they are the least to be dependent on as an evidence of a title to the inheritance of the saints in light.

The other kind of evidence is an habitual disposition to obey the requirements of God that abiding preference of God's glory over everything else that gives a right direction to all our conduct. From what has been said it is manifest that where sinners continue to neglect the means of grace their case is hopeless. Many seem to think that if they are to be saved they shall be saved and if they are to be lost that they shall be lost and look upon religion as some mysterious thing for the implantation of which in their minds they must wait the pleasure of a sovereign God.

They pay attention to every other subject and occupy their thoughts with everything that is calculated to banish religion from their minds and still hope to be converted. This is as irrational as if a man desiring to obtain the perfection of Christian sobriety should continue to riot and drink and stupefy his powers and expect that in some mysterious way he should by and by become a sober man. From this subject you see the importance of giving a convicted sinner right instruction.

Great care should be taken not to divert his mind from fundamental truths. His attention should be abstracted if possible from everything that regards merely the circumstantial of religion and brought to bear intensely upon the main question that of unconditional submission to God. We should carefully distinguish between a convicted and an awakened sinner.

When the sinner is once thoroughly awakened then there is no need of creating further alarm and indeed in this situation all appeals merely to hope and fear are rather an embarrassment and a hindrance to the progress of the work. When his attention is thoroughly secured the favorable moment should be seized upon fully to enlighten his mind and lead him to a right understanding of his responsibilities and the claims of his maker. If there is any flagging of the attention such appeals should instantly be made to the feelings as to arouse and fix the thoughts and an anxious watchfulness should be constantly kept up to preserve attention and enlighten the mind as fast as possible.

In this way you will most effectively aid the operations of the Holy Spirit, push matters to an issue, and secure the conversion of the sinner to God. Neglecting to distinguish between awakening and conviction has been the cause of many sad failures in securing sound conversions. Often when sinners have been merely awakened they have been treated as if they were convicted.

Their spiritual guides have neglected to seize the opportunity to force home conviction upon them. They have called on them to submit before they duly understood the reasons for submission or the nature of the duty. But as might be expected instead of truly performing it they have imagined themselves willing to do so till their awakenings have subsided and the chill apathy of death has settled down upon them.

You see that preaching terror alone is not calculated to affect the conversion of sinners. It is useful to awaken but unless accompanied with those instructions that enlighten will seldom result in any good. You see why those that preach alone to the hopes of man seldom if ever affect their conversion.

Some go to one extreme and some to the other. Some appeal to fear and others to hope while they seldom reason with the sinner of temperance, of righteousness, or of a judgment to come. They often excite much feeling and many tears but after all such appeals unaccompanied with that discriminating instruction which the sinner needs in regard to his duty and the purpose of his life.

The claims of his maker will seldom result in a sound conversion. Lastly, I remark that from this subject it will be seen that a deathbed is but a poor place for repentance. Many are expecting that if they neglect repentance until they come upon a bed of death that then they shall repent and give their hearts to God.

But alas, how vain the hope in the languor and exhaustion, the pain and distraction, the trembling and anxiety of a deathbed. What opportunity or power is there for that fixedness and intensity of intention that are requisite to break the power of selfishness and change the entire current of the soul? To think is labor. To think intensely is exhausting labor even to a man in health but upon a bed of death to have the intricate accounts of life, to look over the subject of a soul's character and destined to ponder and understand, to hold the agonized mind in warm and distressing contact with great truths of revelation until the heart is

melted with broken, rest assured, is ordinarily, if not always, too great an effort for a dying man.

Be it known to all men that as a general truth to which there are but few exceptions, men die as they live and no dependence can be placed upon those waverings and flickerings and gleamings forth of the struggling mind while the body, all weakness and pain, is breaking down to usher into the presence of its maker. Now is your time in the wakefulness and strength of your powers while the command to make you a new heart and a new spirit and the reasons for the performance of this duty lie fully before you while the gate of heaven stands open and mercy with bleeding hands beckons you to come, seize the present moment and lay hold upon eternal life.

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