

Judicial Blindness

by Charles Finney

Judicial blindness is a state of moral darkness that results from rejecting God's light and refusing to yield to His claims.

Scripture: John 9:39

Topics: "Judicial Blindness", "Accountability to Truth"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the concept of 'Judicial Blindness,' emphasizing that moral obligation is contingent upon the light of knowledge one possesses. He explains that those who claim to see, like the Pharisees, are held to a higher standard of accountability, and if they reject the light they have, they risk being given over to blindness. Finney illustrates this principle through biblical examples and contemporary cases, warning that the greater the light one has, the greater the danger of falling into delusion if that light is ignored. He urges listeners to embrace and obey the truth they know, as failure to do so leads to spiritual desolation and moral blindness.

Transcript

"And Jesus said, 'For judgment I am come into this world; that they which see not might see, and that they which see, might be made blind.' And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also? Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin, but now ye say, We see: therefore your sin remaineth.["] --John ix., 39, 40.

In discussing the subject presented in these words I propose,

I. TO NOTICE SOME TRUTHS THAT ARE ASSUMED IN THIS TEXT.

II. TO POINT OUT SOME PRINCIPLES OF THE DIVINE ADMINISTRATION WHICH ARE REVEALED HERE.

III. TO ADDUCE SOME ILLUSTRATIONS OF THESE PRINCIPLES AS REVEALED IN THE HISTORY OF GOD'S PROVIDENCES.

I. 1. Christ obviously assumes that obligation is conditioned upon light. "If ye were blind ye should have no sin." Beyond question the blindness here spoken of is mental not physical, so that our Savior here explicitly asserts that if the Pharisees had no knowledge of duty they would have no sin;--which of course assumes that the presence of some knowledge of duty is a condition of sin--and consequently of moral

obligation.

2. Christ also assumes that the guilt of disobedience is graduated by the degree of our knowledge. In proportion as we are enlightened, is our guilt, if we resist the demands of conscience, enhanced.

These principles are implied not only in our text but universally throughout the Bible. The careful reader of his Bible can not fail to notice this.

In this as in other respects its teachings are most entirely accordant with the convictions of our own minds. Every unsophisticated mind affirms that these principles are righteous and that nothing else could be.

II. I am to point out some principles of the divine government which are revealed in these words.

1. God does not require of us natural impossibilities. If He did He might require us to do duty although we do not understand either what the requirement is, or the authority of Him who requires it. Right over against this Christ says,--"If ye were blind ye should have no sin." What principle is implied in this language? Beyond all question, this; that if we have no knowledge of duty, we can incur no guilt by neglect. Indeed, neglect always implies something known, which is neglected. As also transgression implies some known rule or law which is wickedly passed over.

Where no knowledge of law exists, it is impossible that there should be either culpable neglect or transgression. And God never requires such impossibilities. He never demands the making of brick without straw. As it is impossible for men physically blind to see physical objects; so is it impossible for men utterly ignorant of duty to act morally; therefore God never requires them to do it.

2. God really does require of us according to the blessings we have received. He holds us responsible for the light he has given us. As Christ said to the Jews, "But now ye say, "We see;" therefore your sin remaineth." You profess to be enlightened; grant that you are; then your sin is not only actual but great.

You will observe that the Pharisees scornfully repelled the idea that they were morally blind. "What!" they would say;--"do you mean to insinuate that we have not the true knowledge of God? Indeed we have it, before any people on earth." "Very well," said our Lord; "then on your own ground you have the greater sin." Now this shows most plainly that Christ assumed the principle of guilt according to light, and neither holds the morally dark-minded responsible, nor exempts the enlightened from responsibility.

3. God will visit with judicial blindness those who have light, but abuse it. "For judgment, said Christ, have I come into this world, that those who see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind." What is this "judgment?" Christ himself explains it. It is awarding retribution according to deeds--especially those deeds of mind which respect the use or abuse of moral light. He comes to try with the presentation of light those who have not hitherto enjoyed it, (the dark-minded heathen) and to doom to judicial blindness those (the Jews) who have had light to see by, but have neglected to improve and use it. Christ comes to smite them with blindness for their great sin.

Since the sin lies in rejecting light, it is plain that the greater the light is which God gives to a people or to an individual, the more certainly and speedily will He visit them with judicial blindness, if they reject this light. All this seems plainly implied in what Christ says here.

III. Illustrations of these principles.

We have one in the case of these Scribes and Pharisees. They had long enjoyed much light respecting God and their duty. In their hands they held many clear and precious prophecies of the coming Messiah,--prophecies which unfolded his spiritual character, and which might have shown them that Jesus of Nazareth is the personage of whom Moses and the prophets spake.

But they did not relish the spiritual views of the Messiah; they preferred a different character; the wish became father to corresponding thoughts, and they formed an ideal mainly from their own hearts' imagination. To this ideal the man of Nazareth did not correspond; so they rejected him; and God by consequence rejected them. Christ's actual coming added nothing to their light, but only confounded them in greater, deeper darkness. They had been enlightened above any other people on earth; but their worldly, sensual views, begotten in a worldly, sensual heart, led them to reject Him who came as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the result was that they speedily sunk into darkness more dense and dreadful than that of any people on earth. The clearest exhibitions of truth only blinded them the more. Their wicked hearts seemed to react against the truth only the more violently by how much the brighter it shone.

The same was true of the nation as a whole although there were many individual exceptions. Among the more illiterate portions of the people were many who had never heartily sympathized in the great movements against Jesus of Nazareth; who had been the led and not the leaders; and who not unnaturally embraced the true light when it came distinctly before them. It is a most remarkable fact that Christ was obliged to choose his disciples from among the illiterate and unenlightened classes--inasmuch as those who had been educated after the Jewish mode had almost to a man become so hardened by long resistance of the light they had, as to render their reception of more, quite hopeless. To those who had enjoyed most light, and abused it, the teachings of Jesus Christ were only darkness. They might have seen before Christ came, but having made themselves voluntarily blind, they were precisely in a state to be cursed and not blessed by his teaching.

We often see the same principle illustrated in the case of children brought up in highly religious families. Such are in danger of experiencing the greatest moral blindness. Unless they embrace the truths made known to them, they must experience the terribly hardening influence of knowing yet not doing their duty.

Few men have lived under stronger light than Aaron Burr. A grandson of the elder President Edwards, son of an eminently pious mother, his parents and friends holding forth before him the best forms of gospel light then known, who could be more favored than he? Pierpont Edwards was another man of perhaps equally favorable early training--yet how dreadful the depth of hardness and crime to which he sank! If you had searched the whole world you might not have found two children brought up under stronger light and clearer instruction than they. Yet what sons were they of such pious parents! Aaron Burr, and Pierpont Edwards, stood among the highest class of gifted intellects; but O, how did they fall like Lucifer, son of the morning! The very name of Aaron Burr became a hissing and a bye-word. Few men have better earned a deep and lasting infamy. He trod the pearls of divine knowledge under his feet, and what other result could follow than judicial blindness and the most utter moral desolation!

I might name a great many cases of this sort where men have been reared in the very garden of the Lord--nurtured on the praying hearts of some of God's dearest children; yet resisting all light and all persuasion, they became devils incarnate! Some are so presumptuous, and so misjudge, as to suppose that for his honor's sake God will not suffer the children of so pious parents to go to hell. The greatest possible mistake! The truth is that when sinners resist so much light the honor of God demands that He should withhold his Spirit, and let them alone, and ere long, often most suddenly, He turns them into hell.

Since God has called, but they refused, therefore in dread retribution, He says,--"Now ye may call, and I will not answer. Ye may make many prayers and I will not hear."

On the same principle, many instances occur in which those congregations which have enjoyed the most enlightening instruction, have been at length given up of God to become the most hardened and desolate of men.

Some of you have heard of or read the sermons of Pres. Davies. You know them to be among the most excellent sermons ever preached. I read them in my early life with the deepest interest. For a long time I felt a great desire to learn the history of that congregation and church to whom he preached. At last I fell in with a man who knew their history most intimately. There is no place, said he, in all the land, where so deep darkness reigns, and reigns with such fearful sway as there. The church on that once consecrated spot has but one surviving male member.

As usual, where many are greatly blessed, others too are greatly cursed, and sometimes, for an awful warning to the latter class, God lets the swelling waves of moral desolation roll over a place, and almost utterly extinguish the light of the candlestick which shone on so many eyes in vain.

Another illustration may be seen in the astonishing blindness of many who embrace all forms of error and religious delusion. I can recollect several whom I knew in my early childhood. They were brought up under the prayers and instructions of very pious parents and teachers. Yet they were the first to embrace Mormonism. Others seemed to be foremost in yielding a ready assent to Universalism. Others have embraced Davisism, running after every foolish and absurd thing, discarding all they used to believe, as if they would have their revenge on those blessed truths for the unwelcome restraints and annoyances which themselves had experienced from such enemies. It seemed to be a delight to them to explode all they had ever believed. Why? Let their history only be known and you will see why. They were visited with judicial blindness. Christ comes to them as to the ancient Jews, that they which see might be made blind. Can there be a more terrific doom!

Go and visit those places which have been blessed with great revivals. You will find that those who have been blessed with the greatest light, but have rejected it, are fearfully blinded and hardened. You will find Universalism and all the other ridiculous forms of error springing right up where the brightest light has shone, and where the greatest revivals have prevailed. Right here, among that very people where God has done so much to enlighten men's minds, there, among those who resisted that light, you will find more errors, and errors more pernicious springing up than anywhere else. There you will find men ready to swallow down greedily the most ridiculous and disgusting forms of error.

When men have been deeply convicted of sin and have resisted their convictions, they will almost inevitably fall into the most profound moral darkness. They will get entirely bewildered; will seem to lose their delicate perception of nice moral distinctions, and readily call good, evil; and evil, good. In this state of mind they are ready to embrace all forms of fatal and delusive error. Nothing is too gross and revolting for them to receive and love. How often have I been surprised to hear what men would say who had run this career--things which it would seem impossible for any man in his senses to believe. Indeed you can not account for their believing such things, except on the supposition that God has given them up to judicial blindness. This blindness is far greater in their case than ever occurs among those who have never been so highly instructed. The violence done to their moral nature is more terrible, and consequently the shock it receives is the greater. In this state of fearful blindness, all means for their salvation are nearly

or quite hopeless. Others under the same means may be enlightened and saved; but they will be only the more benighted, by how much the clearer and stronger the light you pour upon their sightless moral eye-balls. Their hearts seem to be set upon resisting the light, and their reaction against it will be the greater according as the action to be resisted is the more annoying. They "hate the light, and will not come to it lest their deeds should be reproved."

Ye who have been in revivals and have watched the subsequent course of those who have passed through them unblessed, can bear your testimony to what I am saying. You have seen many cases which seemed most strange and unaccountable, only on the supposition that "God has sent them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." Not long since I had a long conversation with a man who had been carried away with Davisism. To my astonishment he told me, in substance, that in his belief Davis was far ahead of Jesus Christ. He thinks it an honor to Christ that Davis speaks well of Him, as if the name of Christ needed to be honored, or could be, by the commendation of such a man as Davis! The man of whom I speak has been greatly enlightened; he has been wont to hold up his light for other men to walk by;--but now, alas! how has his light been turned to darkness! Who that knew him once could believe what their eyes now see of him and their ears hear?

Again, who does not know that where churches have become formal, they have soon been given up to strong delusion. For example, the Papal church. When they refused to conform in heart to the truth they held, into what ridiculous and gross delusions did they fall! Down, down, they went with rapid pace into the grossest darkness.

On the same principle many of the most enlightened sinners become infidels. Rejecting what light they have, God gives them over to judicial blindness, and they are then ripe for the grossest delusions. Commonly you will find the most bitter infidels among those who have known most of the gospel--who have been most pressed with its claims, and whose minds have consequently become most sore and restive under its galling demands. They have done most violence to their moral natures, and God has righteously given them over to the most deep and damning delusions.

REMARKS.

1. Those who have been so much enlightened as to see and admit the truth, have reached a point where it is most perilous to stop. This is the last place at which man should think of stopping. It is nothing less than utter madness to stop there. If you were to hear the cry of fire in the dead of night, and even suppose it to be probably a false alarm, yet you would naturally look out and see, and if you found all well you would rest again. But if you should find that verily your house is all on fire--if this truth should flash on your mind, and you could not but admit it, what should we think of you if you should sit down and invite sleep again? Think of you? Of course, that you are mad or deranged--or if not, that you are infinitely wicked! What? let your house burn down upon your wife and children, and make no effort to save either of them! And are you not mad that you should do this?

Now apply this illustration. You know the gospel; you admit its truth. You start up and find, in fact, that you are upon the brink of an eternal hell. You see the deep pit opening beneath your feet, and the flames rolling up just ready to seize upon you--and yet you can lie down and sleep! Can anything be so perilous as this? You know that this hell is kindled to burn forever! You know that the destruction of the sinner there is "without remedy." You know that no other loss can begin to compare with the loss of the soul. Your own soul is in most certain and dreadful peril, and yet you can remain inactive, as if all this were only a false

alarm! O, was there ever such infatuation? Better that you had never known the gospel, than that having known it, you should turn away from its proffered salvation. Infinitely less guilty and less dangerous for you it were, that you should never have seen a Bible--never have heard a sermon, never have been made the subject of one prayer.

2. Many seem to bless themselves for the light they enjoy, and give themselves great credit for knowing and admitting the gospel in theory. "O," say they, "we are not infidels, not we! We know all about the gospel." But do you obey it? "O no, we are in no haste about obeying it. We shall have a convenient season yet." So you resist the light God has given you! Your knowledge of the gospel is, so far, a curse to you and not a blessing. You are treasuring up fearful wrath against the day of wrath, and can do nothing else than this so long as you withhold your heart from its claims.

3. We see whence come the multitude of errors that overspread the land. Their number and grossness are just what might be expected where God has so greatly blessed the people as He has in our churches. In all cases this will be found to be the course;--great light abused, has resulted in gross delusion. Men have resisted God's claims and grieved away his Spirit; and now the Spirit withdraws; Satan comes in with seven other spirits more wicked; he takes full possession, and the last state is worse than the first. All forms of fanaticism revive; spiritual blindness ensues; the men who would not come to the light lest their deeds should be reprov'd may now have darkness to their hearts' content; they have loved it and God says, let them have it! and on, on, they go down the dark road to hell.

4. Those who are judicially blinded will usually give this indication of the fact--they will never take warning! You may utter the most solemn admonitions in their ears, and seek to press the truth upon their conscience; you labor in vain! They will not believe you unless you tell them lies! If you speak to them the truth, they will not believe. Speak to them lies, and prophecy deceits, and they will hail you as a friend and a brother. But speak only the truth, and you can gain no access to their hearts. You can carry them whither you please with error; but you can not lead them into truth. You can not reach them with warnings, for they will not take the alarm.

How remarkable that when the gospel preacher sounds the note of warning, the tender conscience will feel its utmost power, and perhaps be even extremely alarmed; while those to whom it really belongs will not suffer it to touch themselves. They leave it to pass by them as the idle wind which men regard not.

Such give the strongest proof that they are judicially blinded.

5. It is always to be expected that individuals, families or communities who enjoy great light, but will not yield their hearts to it, will turn out badly. You might select from such a community the most horrible instances of depravity. Such families will furnish cases at which the Christian would stand aghast. These are, under God's government, only the natural results of having and abusing great light.

6. The revivals of the last thirty years have resulted in the judicial blindness of multitudes of modern Scribes and Pharisees. It is to be feared that many ministers even have fallen into a most alarming state of declension, as the result of failing to act up to the light God gave them. Many churches too have gone backward with a fearful and perpetual backsliding. They should have pressed onward and upward; but they did not embrace all the truth which God revealed to them; they shrunk from bearing the cross; they held parley with the spirit of the world; and a dreadful blindness has come over them. Although in many churches there are many pious members, yet in not a few it would seem that the majority are given up to believe a lie, and to lapse into a most horrible state of carnality and declension. In fact they are often

opposed to any effort to promote revivals of religion! What can this mean? What does it indicate? After having experienced such great blessings from revivals, why do they now oppose revivals? Why is this? Go back and trace the history of those who were only nominally in them, and you will get the answer. They never loved revivals. They had more light in those revivals than they chose to admit or obey; hence their eyes were blinded and their hearts hardened. They do not want to be annoyed again with such appeals to their consciences. They dread to be brought again into such burning contact with convicting truth. Consider these things, and you will see reason enough for all the facts now present in the history of the churches.

7. When Christ comes among a people, some are blinded rather than enlightened by his coming. This is probably a universal fact. I have often known the blindness of persons increase precisely as the work of God increased. As light progressed, and truth beamed and blazed with increasing power, their hearts grew hard and their eyes dark. When it seemed impossible that they should resist, then they seemed only the more opposed, and the more embittered against the truth.

For a long time this seemed a great wonder to me, but now I understand it. The reason of it is most apparent. Men who do not love the truth will resist it till they have paralyzed the power of truth upon their will; till they have grieved the Spirit of God away, and nearly put out the moral eyes of the soul; then they can believe any lie and deny any truth. Then they are ready for any deeds of darkness, or for any depths of absurdity.

8. In looking over the history of this place, I have said to myself--Now I shall not be disappointed to see enemies to the truth rising up among us, growing more and more benighted in mind and besotted in error till they become darkened and deluded beyond any other people on the earth. What have we seen elsewhere in the history of the church? Just what our Savior would have us expect--"For judgment am I come into this world, that they which see not, might see, and that they which see might be made blind."

Contemplating the state of things here, my mind has been greatly impressed with the fear that we should get into a state in which God's honor would demand that He should blot us out and leave us to moral ruin. We may say--"We have Abraham to our father"--yet it may avail us as little as it did the Jews. We may have said it too long already, and may have relied upon it too much. None the less reason for our relation to father Abraham is there to fear that God will give us up. On the contrary, just in proportion as we have been favored with light may we expect that God will send on us judicial blindness. We may think we are doing well; but God will surely carry out the changeless principles of his moral government just as He always has done in all ages and in all other places.

In my more personal conversations with this people, I am struck to find so many who are greatly in the dark. Instead of advancing in knowledge, and becoming more and more enlightened, they are only the more darkened and confused; they say things now which they would not have said years ago. How often has it happened that persons have begun to doubt, and finally to yield up opinions which they once held strongly, progressing continually forward towards giving up the truth they once knew. Now take warning, beloved; see if it be true that you really embrace in your heart the truth you profess to believe. If ever in all my life my soul was filled with trembling, it was when this question came home to my mind--Does my heart really embrace the truth which I believe, or is it merely received in my intelligence? O there was a searching power in this question, and I could not help feeling it. I found myself continually on my knees, crying out--"Lord, I never knew this before. Did I ever believe this before? Surely this seems to me like a new gospel." So much more thoroughly did I now see the marrow and fatness of the gospel, that it

seemed as if all my former faith in it had been only as a dream, and not a reality. When God was making such revelations as kept my very being all on fire, then the question--Is not all my faith in the gospel a merely intellectual belief? pressed upon me with unwonted power. Then I cried out--"Lord, don't enlighten me and yet suffer my heart to draw back, for if Thou dost, I shall certainly go down by the shortest road to destruction."

Brethren, do you believe with all your heart what you profess to believe? Some say --"I believe the doctrine of sanctification." If you do, you should embrace it with all your hearts. Failing to embrace it heartily, you resist the truth; and then the result will naturally be that God will leave you to darkness, and you will find a short path to error, delusion and damnation. If you will not receive into your heart the truth you know, you can not rationally hope that you have a particle of real religion. "He that doeth truth cometh to the light"--for he loves all that is real light, and bids it most welcome to his soul. Do you suppose you can be a Christian and yet refuse to obey known truth? Nay, verily; a disobedient Christian can no more be, than an obedient, dutiful sinner. When you see a truth which you yet refuse to obey, in the very nature of the case you abjure your religion. You are at once on the ground of God's enemies. You are saying to God--"I am not Thy servant." There can be no greater mistake than to suppose that men can be religious and yet not obey known truth. Nothing is more plainly taught in the Bible than this, that if you "keep the whole law and yet offend in one point, you are guilty of all." You really evince a spirit of disobedience to God and of disregard to his law; and this is just what God regards as sin. It is in the very nature of the case impossible that a man should be allowed to say before God--"Lord, I will obey this precept, and this; but I will not obey that, and that." There can not be the least particle of virtue, piety, or obedience in this. So long therefore as there is one promise which you know, but do not embrace, you can not heartily embrace any. So long as there is one threatening known, but not regarded, you do not really regard any.

I am afraid there is a great delusion in the church on this point. Many think they have considerable religion, while they say frankly--I know I am living in a great deal of sin. They flatter themselves that they are all pretty good Christians, because they are not the greatest sinners. Some degree of known disobedience they think to be quite admissible in Christian character. Must not such persons be utterly fallen from all real obedience? Are their hearts at all with God? Nay, verily.

Let the question be asked--Do you believe that you ought to live in entire obedience to all the known will of God? Yes. Most will say--we believe that. Do you believe that through gospel grace you may do so? No doubt of it. Well, do you practice accordingly? O no?![!] we never professed to practice on this doctrine. Let others make their high professions; for our part we choose not to make any such professions. Perhaps you even find fault with those who do make such professions, and think yourselves quite as good Christians as they. Perhaps you misjudge them and perhaps they may not be either prudent or humble; but no matter; if all the world should profess the highest experience, and should then apologize before your very eyes, your guilt could be none the less if you have seen your duty and your privilege, and have resisted this light from God to your soul. You must keep up with the light God gives you, or you are ruined. There can be no exception to this righteous law--no failure in its swift and terrible execution.

Then let every hearer ask himself--Do I embrace and obey all known truth? Do I reverence every precept and apply by faith every promise?

But you say--"I don't pretend to be sanctified." I answer, you did profess to be sanctified when you came out from the world and separated yourself from the ungodly. You do profess to take the Holy Ghost for your Sanctifier every time you renew your church covenant. You solemnly declare that you renounce the

world and all sin, and take the Lord Jehovah to be your God and portion. If this be not the truth, what did you profess? To be living in sin? To be serving the devil in part and Christ in part? No, you said no such thing. If you were honest, you could not possibly have meant any such thing. The church when she opened her arms to receive you assumed that you came, as the whole-hearted servants and followers of Jesus Christ. And now are you eager to back out from your covenant-responsibilities upon the claim that you never professed to renounce all sin? What does this mean? Are you aware that in this matter you have to deal with God, and not with man only? Did you not know that He who walks among the golden candlesticks searches the hearts and tries the reins? Will you forget that He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity?

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