

# Legal Religion: Principles of Fear

by Charles Finney

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*The sermon emphasizes the distinction between selfish people and true friends of God and man, highlighting the consequences of selfishness and the characteristics of true friends of God and man.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 39:9, Exodus 32:26, Psalm 51:13, Acts 20:35, Romans 8:1

**Topics:** "True Faith vs. Legalism", "Selfishness vs. Selflessness"

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## Description

Charles Finney addresses the concept of 'Legal Religion' by emphasizing that many individuals approach their faith out of fear and self-interest rather than genuine love for God. He contrasts the legalist, who performs religious duties out of obligation and fear of punishment, with the true believer, who seeks to honor God and serve others selflessly. Finney challenges listeners to examine their motivations, urging them to move beyond a self-centered faith to one that actively seeks to rid the world of sin and promote holiness. He calls for a deeper understanding of true Christianity, which is characterized by love, self-denial, and a desire to do good for others. Ultimately, he implores his audience to determine which side they are on: the Lord's side or the side of selfishness.

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## Transcript

"Who is on the Lord's side?" Ex 32:26.

The conduct of men invariably shows what their true and main design in life is. A man's character is as his supreme object is. If you can learn by his conduct what his leading object is, then you can know with certainty what his character is.

For those motivated by self-love or selfishness, hope and fear are the main springs of all they do in religion. These individuals are actuated by a supreme regard to their won good and the fear of evil. The hope of advantage to themselves is the foundation of all their conduct.

They make the Lord a secondary concern. Their conduct shows that they do not regard Christianity as the principal business of life but as subordinate to other things. They consider religion something that ought to come in and find a place among other things, rather like a Sabbath-day business to be confined to the closet. Christianity and business are considered as entirely separate concerns.

If they had right views of the matter, they would consider the Lord's business the only lawful business in life. Then Christianity would characterize everything they did and would obviously be an act of obedience.

## CRACKING THE WHIP OF CONSCIENCE

People motivated by selfishness perform their religious duties as a task. Such a one does not delight in communion with God. He performs prayer as a task. He does religious duties as sick people take medicine--not because they love it but because they hope to derive some benefit from it.

They possess a legal spirit and not a gospel spirit. They do what they are obliged to do for the Lord and not what they love to do. They obey God's commands but do not love them. They always inquire, in regard to duty, not how they can do good but how they can be saved. The difference between them is the same as between a convinced sinner and a true convert. The convinced sinner asks, "What must I do to be saved?" The true convert asks, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

Fear, much more than hope, motivated them. They perform their duties chiefly because they dare not omit them. They go to communion not because they love Christ or their brethren but because they dare not stay away. They fear criticism from the Church, or they are afraid they will be damned if they neglect it. They pray not because they enjoy communion with God but because they dare not neglect Him. They have the spirit of slaves and serve God like slaves, fearing to be beaten with many stripes.

These "believers" feel as if they were obliged to perform many religious duties or be lashed by conscience and lose their hopes. Therefore, they painfully and laboriously perform many works a year, and that they call Christianity!

Their religion is not only produced by the fear of disgrace or the fear of hell, it is mostly of a negative character. They satisfy themselves with doing nothing that is very bad. Having no spiritual views, they regard the law of God chiefly as a system of prohibitions to guard men from certain sins rather than a system of benevolence fulfilled by love. If they are moral in their conduct, relatively serious and decent in their general attitude, and perform the required amount of religious exercises, they are satisfied.

Their conscience harasses them, not so much about sins of omission as sins of commission. They make a distinction between neglecting to do what God positively requires and doing what He positively forbids. The most you can say of them is that they are not bad. They seem to think little or nothing of being useful to the cause of Christ as long as they cannot be convicted of any positive transgression.

Where they have enlightened minds and tender consciences, you often find them the most rigid of all "believers." They tithe everything and are perfect Pharisees, carrying everything to the greatest extremes as far as outward strictness is concerned.

But despite all their strictness, they cannot help realizing that they are great sinners after all; and, having no just sense of gospel justification, this leaves them very unhappy. The more enlightened and tender their conscience, the more unhappy they are. Regardless of their strictness, they feel they have come short of their duty. Not having any gospel faith or anointing of the Holy Spirit that brings peace to the soul, they are unsatisfied, uneasy, and miserable.

Perhaps many of you have seen such people. Perhaps some of you are such, and you have never known what it is to feel justified before God through the blood of Jesus Christ. You don't know what it is to feel that Jesus Christ has accepted and owned you as His. You never felt in your minds what is spoken of in this text: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1)

Does such language bring this reality home to you because you experience it in your soul? Or do you, after all, still feel condemned and guilty, with no sense of pardoned sin and no peace with God or confidence in Jesus Christ?

## COMFORTABLE HOPES

Legalists are encouraged and cheered by reading about saints who fell into great sins. They feel wonderfully instructed and edified when they hear the sins of God's people set forth in a strong light. Then they are comforted and their hopes are wonderfully strengthened. Instead of being humbled and distressed, feeling that such conduct is so contrary to Christianity that they could hardly believe they were saints if it had not been found in the Bible, they feel gratified and strengthened by these things. I once knew an elder who was brought before the session of a church for the crime of adultery. He excused himself by this plea: "I did not know," he said, "why I should be expected to be better than David, the man after God's own heart."

Many professing Christians are pleased if their minister adopts a low standard and is ready to hope that almost everybody is a Christian. It is easy to see why they are pleased with such an exhibition of Christianity--it serves their main design and helps them maintain what they call a "comfortable hope," although they do so little for God.

Opposite them is the man whose main design is to rid the world of sin. He wants all men to be holy and wants to have the true standard of holiness held up. He wants all men to be saved but knows they cannot be saved unless they are truly holy. A godly man would just as soon think of Satan's going to heaven as getting a man there by cheapening the Bible standard of holiness.

Selfish people are fond of the doctrine of saint's perseverance and the doctrine of election. Often, all they want is what they call the doctrines of grace. If these doctrines can be preached comfortably without threatening their consciences too much, then they are fed.

Legalists love to have their minister preach sermons that feed Christians. Their main object is not to save sinners but to be saved themselves. Therefore, they always choose a minister not for his ability in preaching for the conversion of sinners but for his talents in feeding the church with mere abstractions.

In their prayers, they ask mainly for assurance of going to heaven. Their great object is to secure their hopes. They pray for evidence, instead of praying that their faith may be strengthened and their souls full of the Holy Spirit to pull sinners out of the fire.

Great stress is laid on emotions. If at any time they have intense religious feelings, they dwell in them and make this evidence last a long time. One season of excitement will prop their hopes as long as they can distinctly remember. It doesn't matter if they are not doing anything now, for they remember the time when they had these feelings, and that keeps their hopes alive.

If there has been a revival, and they got so involved that they could weep, pray, and exhort with feeling, they will have a comfortable hope for years on the strength of it. After the revival is over, they do nothing to promote Christianity, and their hearts become hard. They have a comfortable hope, patiently waiting for a revival to come and give them another move.

If you could listen at the door of their closets, you would hear eight-tenths of all their petitions going up for themselves. It shows how they value their own salvation in comparison with the salvation of others. At a

prayer meeting it will often be the same. You would not suppose, from their prayers, that they knew there was a sinner on earth traveling the road to hell. They pray for themselves just as they do in the closet, only they link the rest of the church with them and say we.

## LIVING TO HONOR GOD

Selfish people are more anxious to be prepared to die than to save sinners around them. If they ask for the Spirit of God, they want it to prepare them to die. Compare this with David's prayer: "Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee" (Psalm 51:13)

How many of you are of this character? An individual who made it his great absorbing object to do good and save sinners would not think as much about when, where, or how he will die as how he may do the most good while he lives. And as to his death, he leaves that all to God. He has long ago given his soul up to Him. Now the great question is not, "When shall I die?" but, "How shall I live to honor God?"

Many professing Christians are characterized by a fear of punishment and an unconcern for sin. True friends of God and man are more afraid of sin than of punishment. They don't ask, "If I do this, will I be punished?" Instead, they ask the question that Joseph asked: "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9). This was the spirit of a child of God--so much afraid of sin that he had no thought of punishment.

False converts often indulge in sin if they can persuade themselves that God will forgive them or when they think they can repent of it afterwards. They often reason in the way: "The pastor does this," or "The elders do this, so why shouldn't I do the same?" They fear punishment not sin. They know they sin, but they hope to escape the punishment. This is contrary to the spirit of the true friends of God, whose absorbing object it is to get all sin out of the world. Such people are not half as afraid of hell as they are of committing sin.

Selfish people are more fond of receiving good than doing good. These people do not have the true gospel. They have never entered into the Spirit of Jesus Christ: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). A person actuated by true love to God and man enjoys what he does to benefit others far more than those who receive good from his hand. He is benevolent, and it is a gratification to him to show kindness. His heart is set upon it, and when he can do it, a holy joy is shed over his mind.

The other class are more eager to receive. They want to receive instruction more than to impart it. They want to receive comfort, but they are never ready to deny themselves to give the comforts of the gospel to others. How directly contrary this is to the spirit of the gospel, which finds its supreme happiness in communicating happiness to others. But these people want everybody to impart happiness to them, instead of striving to bless others. These two classes of characters are just as opposite as light and darkness.

Selfish people are chiefly afraid of hell, and when they are strongly convicted, they are afraid others will go there, too. They seek happiness for themselves; and when self is not in the way, they seek the same for others. They pray for sinners, not because they have such a sense of the evil that sinners are committing, but because they have a sense of the terrors of hell. They want sinners converted because they are in danger, not because they dishonor God. Their great object in praying is to secure the safety of those they pray for, as it is their great object in life to secure their own safety. They pity themselves, and they pity others. If there was no danger, they would have no motive to pray either for themselves or others.

The true friends of God and man feel compassion for sinners, too, but are much more concerned for the honor of God. They are more distressed to see God abused and dishonored than to see sinners go to hell. If God must either be forever dishonored or men go to hell, they will decide that sinners must sink to endless torment sooner than God suffer dishonor.

True saints manifest their feelings in their prayers. You hear them praying for sinners as rebels against God--guilty criminals deserving eternal wrath. While they are full of compassion for sinners, they feel holy indignation against them for their conduct toward the blessed God.

False converts are apt to talk a great deal about their doubts. This makes up a great part of their history, and they are not prepared to do anything for the Lord because of these doubts. If the devil at any time suggests that the true friends of God and man are going to hell, the first answer they think of is, "What if I should? Only let me pull sinners out of the fire while I can."

Of course, a real Christian may have doubts. But they are much less apt to have them if they are fully bent on saving sinners. It will be very hard work for Satan to get an active church to be troubled with doubts.

### REJOICING IN SELF-DENIAL

Selfish people are uneasy at the increasing calls to self-denial. The good that could be done does not enter into their thoughts because they dwell on what they would have to give up.

These aggressive attacks in the kingdom of darkness distress false converts. Their objective never was to search out and banish everything dishonorable to God or injurious to man. They never determined to clear out every evil to soul or body from the earth. Therefore, they are distressed by those who are truly engaged to search out and do away with evil.

When legalists are called upon to deny themselves for the sake of doing good, instead of it being a pleasant thing, it causes them unmingled pain. Such a one does not know anything about enjoying self-denial. He cannot understand how anybody can rejoice in denying himself for the sake of doing good to others. He thinks it is a height in Christianity that he has not attained.

Yet the true friend of God and man, whose heart is determined to do good, never enjoys spending money as much as when he gives to promote Christ's Kingdom. If he is really holy, he knows it is the best thing he can do with his money. He's even sorry to have to use money for anything else when there are so many opportunities to do good with it.

If an individual has his heart set upon something, all the money he can save for that objective is pleasing to him. The more he can save from other objectives for this cause, the happier he is. If he finds it hard to give money to the Lord, his heart is not set on it. If it were, he would give his money with joy.

What would you think of a man who protested against giving money to the Church and yet was excited about missions? After calling for money, he himself never even gave five dollars. It would be obvious that his heart was not truly set on the cause of Christ. If it was, he would give his money as freely as water.

These false converts are not concerned with promoting revivals. They always have to be dragged into the work. When a revival begins and the excitement is great, then they come in and appear to be excited. But you never see them taking the lead or striking out ahead.

As a matter of fact, these hypocrites do not convert sinners to God. They may do good, in various ways--and so may Satan do good deeds. But as a general thing, they do not pull sinners out of the fire. The reason is that this is not their great objective. How is it with you? Do you absolutely succeed in converting sinners? Is there anyone who will look to you as the instrument of his conversion? If you were truly on fire, you could not rest satisfied without doing it, and you would work in such earnest and with such agonizing prayer that you would do it.

#### WHOM DO YOU SERVE?

Selfish people don't show much distress when they discover sin. They don't rebuke it. They love to mingle in scenes where sin is committed, and they can hear and join in vain conversation. Their spirit is worldly, and they love worldly company. Instead of hating even the garment spotted with the flesh, they love to hang around the confines of sin, as if it satisfied them.

If any of the missions are in need, they neither know nor feel it. If missions prosper, they take no interest in it. They very likely do not read any Christian literature. Or, if they do read it, they read only the trivial news. The true friend of God and man, on the other hand, love to learn about revivals and missions. When they hear that the Lord has poured out His Spirit on a mission, a glow of holy joy surges through Him.

Lovers of self don't aim at anything higher than a legal, painful, and negative religion. The love of Jesus doesn't constrain them to constant warfare against sin and a desire to do all the good in their power. What they do is done only because they think they must, and they maintain a formal, heartless, and worthless piety.

If an extended meeting is proposed, you will generally find these people making objections. If any other special effort is proposed, they come reluctantly and prefer the "good old way." They feel angry at being obliged to add so much every year to their religion in order to maintain their hope.

These selfish people don't pray in their closets because they love to pray; they think it's their duty, and they dare not neglect it. The Bible isn't sweet to their souls. They don't enjoy the reading, as a person enjoys exquisite delights, but read it because it's their duty to read it. They know it's not right to profess to be a Christian and not read the Bible; but they find it a dry book.

Slight excuses keep them away from prayer meetings. They never go unless they find it necessary to keep up appearances or maintain their hope. And when they do go, instead of having their souls melted and fired with love, they are cold, listless and dull--and glad when it is over.

Their hearts are not agonized with such thoughts as this: How long will wickedness prevail? When will this wretched world be free from sin and death? When will men stop sinning against God? Instead they ask, "When will I go to heaven and be free from all my trials and cares?"

This religion describes the religion of the majority of professing Christians, and they are radically defective.

True Christianity is far from this. It differs as much from Christianity as much as the Pharisees differed from Christ--as much as the true gospel differs from legal religion.

To which of these classes do you belong? It is eternally important that you know for certain what your true character is--whether you are motivated by true love to God and man or whether you are religious out of regard to yourself. Are you the true friend of God and man or not? Settle this, and then go to work for God.

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