

# Legal Religion

by Charles Finney

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*Charles Finney's sermon 'Legal Religion' highlights the differences between true Christianity and legal religion, emphasizing the importance of love and compassion in true Christianity.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 32:26, Matthew 22:37

**Topics:** "Self-Examination", "True Religion vs. Legalism"

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## Description

Charles Finney addresses the concept of 'Legal Religion,' emphasizing the distinction between true love for God and a self-serving approach to faith. He categorizes religious individuals into three classes, focusing on those motivated by self-love, who treat religion as a secondary concern and perform duties out of obligation rather than genuine affection. Finney critiques this mindset, highlighting that such individuals often prioritize their own salvation over the salvation of others, lack true joy in spiritual practices, and are more concerned with avoiding punishment than with the honor of God. He calls for self-examination among believers to determine their true motivations in faith and urges them to embrace a more genuine, selfless approach to their relationship with God.

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## Transcript

TEXT:-- "Who is on the Lord's side?" --Exodus xxxii. 26.

LAST Friday evening, you will remember, that in discoursing from this text, I mentioned three classes of professors of religion; those who truly love God and man, those who are actuated solely by selfishness or at most by self-love in their religious duties, and those who are actuated only by a regard for public opinion. I also mentioned several characteristics of the first class, by which they may be known. This evening I intend to mention several characteristics of the second class,

THOSE PROFESSORS WHO ARE ACTUATED BY SELF-LOVE OR BY SELFISHNESS.

I design to show how their leading or main design in religion develops itself in their conduct. The conduct of men invariably shows what is their true and main design. A man's character is as his supreme object is. And if you can learn by his conduct what that leading object is, then you can know with certainty what his character is. And I suppose this may generally be known by us with great certainty, if we would candidly and thoroughly observe their conduct.

These three classes of professors agree in many things, and it would be impossible to discriminate between them by an observation of these things only. But there are certain things in which they differ, and by close observation the difference will be seen in their conduct, from which we infer a difference in their character. And those points in which they differ belong to the very fundamentals of religion.

I will now proceed to mention some of the characteristics of the second class; those who are actuated in religion by self-love, or by selfishness, in whom hope and fear are the main springs of all they do in religion. And the things that I shall mention are such as, when they are seen, make it evident that the individual is actuated by a supreme regard to his own good, and that the fear of evil, or the hope of advantage to himself; is the foundation of all his conduct.

1. They make religion a subordinate concern.

They show by their conduct that they do not regard religion as the principal business of life, but as subordinate to other things. They consider religion as something that ought to come in by the by, as something that ought to come in and find a place among other things, as a sort of Sabbath-day business, or something to be confined to the closet and the hour of family prayer and the Sabbath, and not as the grand business of life. They make a distinction between religious duty and business, and consider them as entirely separate concerns. Whereas, if they had right views of the matter, they would consider religion as the only business of life, and nothing else either lawful or worth pursuing, any further than as it promotes or subserves religion. If they had the right feeling, religion would characterize all that they do, and it would be manifest that every thing they do is an act of obedience to God, or an act of irreligion.

2. Their religious duties are performed as a task, and are not the result of the constraining love of God that burns within them.

Such a one does not delight in the exercise of religious affections, and as to communion with God, he knows nothing of it. He performs prayer as a task. He betakes himself to religious duties as sick persons take medicine, not because they love it, but because they hope to derive some benefit from it.

And here let me ask those who are present tonight, Do you enjoy religious exercises, or do you perform them because you hope to receive benefit by them? Be honest, now, and answer this question, just according to the truth, and see where you stand.

3. They manifestly possess a legal spirit, and not a gospel spirit.

They do rather what they are obliged to do, in religion, and not what they love to do. They have an eye to the commands of God, and yield obedience to His requirements, in performing religious duties, but do not engage in those things because they love them. They are always ready to inquire, in regard to duty, not so much how they can do good, as how they can be saved. There is just the difference between them, that there is 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 wilt thou have me to do?" So this class of professors are constantly asking, "What must I do to get to heaven?" and not "What can I do to get other people there?" The principal object of such a professor of religion is not to save the world, but to save himself.

4. They are actuated by fear much more than by hope.

They perform their religious duties chiefly because they dare not omit them. They go to the communion, not because they love to meet Christ, or because they love to commune with their brethren, but because

they dare not stay away. They fear the censures of the church, or they are afraid they shall be damned if they neglect it. They perform their closet duties not because they enjoy communion with God, but because they dare not neglect them. They have the spirit of slaves, and go about the service of God, as slaves go about the service of their master, feeling that they are obliged to do about so much, or be beaten with many stripes. So these professors feel as if they were obliged to have about so much religion, and perform about so many religious duties, or be lashed by conscience and lose their hopes. And therefore they go through, painfully and laboriously enough, with about so many religious duties in a year, and that they call religion!

5. Their religion is not only produced by the fear of disgrace or the fear of hell, but it is mostly of a negative character.

They satisfy themselves, mostly, with doing nothing that is very bad. Having no spiritual views, they regard the law of God chiefly as a system of prohibitions, just to guard men from certain sins, and not as a system of benevolence fulfilled by love. And so, if they are moral in their conduct, and tolerably serious and decent in their general deportment, and perform the required amount of religious exercises, this satisfies them. 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 very bad. They seem to think little or nothing of being useful to the cause of Christ, so long as they cannot be convicted of any positive transgression.

6. This class of persons are more or less strict in religious duties, according to the light they have and the sharpness with which conscience pursues them.

Where they have enlightened minds and tender consciences, you often find them the most rigid of all professors. They tithe even to mint and annise. They are stiff even to moroseness. They are perfect pharisees, and carry everything to the greatest extremes, so far as outward strictness is concerned.

7. They are more or less miserable in proportion to the tenderness of their conscience.

With all their strictness, they cannot but be sensible that they are great sinners after all; and having no just sense of gospel justification, this leaves them very unhappy. And the more enlightened and tender their conscience, the more they are unhappy. Notwithstanding their strictness, they feel that they come short of their duty, and not having any gospel faith, nor any of that holy anointing of the Holy Spirit that brings peace to the soul, they are unsatisfied and uneasy and miserable.

Perhaps many of you have seen such persons. Perhaps some of you are such, and you never knew what it was to feel justified before God, through the blood of Jesus Christ, and you know nothing what it is to feel that Jesus Christ has accepted and owned you as his. You never felt in your minds what that is which is spoken of in this text, "There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Does such language bring home any warm and practical idea to you, that it is a reality because you experience it in your soul? Or do you, after all, still feel condemned and guilty, and have no sense of pardoned sin and no experimental peace with God or confidence in Jesus Christ?

9. This class of persons are encouraged and cheered by reading the accounts of ancient 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 feeling humbled and distressed, and feeling that such conduct is so contrary to all religion that they could hardly believe they were saints if it had not been found in the Bible, and that they could not believe at all that persons who should do such things under the light of the Christian dispensation, could be saints, they feel gratified and strengthened and their hopes confirmed by all these things. I once knew a man, an elder too, brought before the session of a church for the crime of adultery, and he actually excused himself by this plea. He did not know, he said, why he should be expected to be better than David, the man after God's own heart.

10. They are always much better pleased, by how much the lower the standard of piety is held out from the pulpit.

If the minister adopts a low standard, and is ready charitably to hope that almost everybody is a Christian, they are pleased, and compliment him for his expansive charity, and praise him as such an excellent man, so charitable, &c. It is easy to see why this class of persons are pleased with such an exhibition of Christianity. It subserves their main design. It helps them to maintain what they call a "comfortable hope," notwithstanding they do so little for God. Right over against this, you will see, is the conduct of the man whose main design is to rid the world of SIN. He wants all men to be holy, and therefore he wants to have the true standard of holiness held up. He wants all men to be saved, but he knows they cannot be saved unless they are truly holy. And he would as soon think of Satan's going to heaven as of getting a man there by frittering away the Bible standard of holiness by "charity."

11. They are fond of having comfortable doctrines preached.

Such persons are apt to be fond of having the doctrine of saints' perseverance much dwelt on, and the doctrine of election. Often, they want nothing else but what they call the doctrines of grace. And if they can be preached in such an abstract way, as to afford them comfort without galling their consciences too much, then they are fed.

12. They love to have their minister preach sermons to feed Christians.

Their main object is not to save sinners, but to be saved themselves, and 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.

13. They lay great stress on having a comfortable hope.

You will hear them talking very solemnly about the importance of having a comfortable hope. If they can only enjoy their minds, they show very little solicitude whether any body else around them is saved or not. If they can have only their fears silenced and their hopes cherished, they have religion enough to satisfy them.

Right over against this, you will find the true friends of God and man are thinking mainly of something else.--They are trying to pull sinners out of the fire, and do not spend their energy in sustaining a comfortable hope for themselves.

In their prayers, you will find the class I am now speaking of, are praying mainly that their evidences may be brightened, and that they may feel assured that they are going to heaven, and know that they are accepted of God. Their great object is to secure their hopes, and so they pray that their evidences may be

brightened, instead of praying that their faith may be strengthened, and their souls full of the Holy Ghost to pull sinners out of the fire.

14. They live very much on their own frames of mind.

They lay great stress on the particular emotions which they have from time to time. If at any time they have some high-wrought feelings of a religious nature, they dwell on them, and make this evidence last a great while. One such season of excitement will prop up their hopes as long as they can distinctly call it up to remembrance. No matter if they are not doing any thing now, and are conscious they have no exercises of love to God now, they recollect the time when they had such and such feelings, and that answers to keep alive their hopes. If there has been a revival, and they mingled in its scenes until their imagination has been wrought up so that they could weep and pray and exhort with feeling, during the revival, that will last them a long time, and they will have a comfortable hope for years on the strength of it. Although, after the revival is over, they do nothing to promote religion, and their hearts are as hard as adamant, they have a very comfortable hope all the while, patiently waiting for a revival to come and give them another move.

Are any of you who are here now, propping yourselves up by your past frames and feelings, leaning on evidences, not from what you are now doing but something that you felt last year, or years ago? Let me tell you, that if you are thus living on past experience, you will find it will fail when you come to need it.

15. They pray almost exclusively for themselves.

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. It is as eight to two. And if they pray in meetings, very often it will be just the same, and 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 couple the rest of the church with them so as to say we.

16. Such persons pray to be fitted for death much more than they pray to be fitted to live a useful life.

They are more anxious to be prepared to die, than to be prepared to save sinners around them. If they ask for the Spirit of God, they want it to prepare them to die, more than as the Psalmist prayed, "Then will I teach transgressors thy way, and sinners shall be converted unto thee." How many of you are of this character? How many are there here, whose prayers are described exactly? An individual who made it his great absorbing object to do good and save sinners, would not be apt to think so much about when or where or how he shall die, as how he may do the most good while he lives. And as to his death, he leaves that all to God, and he is not afraid to leave it all with him. He has long ago given his soul up to him, and now the great question with him is not, When shall I die? but, How shall I live so as to honor God?

17. They are more afraid of punishment than they are of sin.

Precisely over against this, you will find the true friends of God and man more afraid of sin than of punishment.--It is not the question with them, "If I do this, shall I be punished?" or "If I do this, will God forgive me?" But the question is that which Joseph asked, "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" There was the spirit of a child of God, afraid of sin more than punishment, and so much afraid of sin that he had no thought of punishment.

This class of persons I am speaking of, 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 this way: "Such a

minister does this," or "Such an elder or professor does this, and why may not I do the same?" There was a member of this church had a class in the Sabbath school; but seeing that others did not take a class, the individual reasoned in this way: "Why should I do it any more than they?" and so gave up the class. There is the spirit of this whole description of professors--"Others get along without doing such and such things, and why should I trouble myself to be better than they?" It is not sin that they fear, but punishment. They sin, THEY KNOW, but they hope to escape the punishment. Who cannot see that this is contrary to the spirit of the true friends of God, whose absorbing object it is to get sin, and all sin, out of the world? Such persons are not half so much afraid of hell as they are of committing sin.

18. They feel and manifest greater anxiety about being saved themselves, than if all the world was going to hell.

Such a professor, if his hope begins to fail, wants to have everybody engaged, to pray for him, and make a great ado; and move all the church, when he never thinks of doing any thing for the sinners around him, who are certainly on the road to hell. He shows that his mind is absorbed in himself, and that his main design is not to see how much good he can do.

19. They are more fond of receiving good than of doing good.

You may know such persons have not the spirit of the gospel. They have never entered into the spirit of Jesus Christ, when he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." A person actuated by true love to God and man, enjoys what he does to benefit others, far more than they do who receive good at his hand. He is really benevolent, and it is a gratification to him to show kindness, because his heart is set upon it, and when he can do it, a holy joy is shed over his mind, and he enjoys it exquisitely.

The other class are more eager to receive than to impart. They want to receive instruction more than to impart it. They want to receive comfort, but are never ready to deny themselves to give the comforts of the gospel to others. How directly contrary this is to the diffusive spirit of the gospel, any one can see at a glance. That spirit finds its supreme happiness in communicating happiness to others. But this class of persons want to lay every body under contribution to impart happiness to themselves, instead of laying themselves out to bless others.

Who does not know these two classes of professors?--One always seeking out objects to do good to, the other always trying to gain good themselves. One anxious to communicate, the other to receive. One to do good, the other to get good. These two classes of characters are just as opposite as light and darkness.

20. If this class of professors are led to pray for the conversion and salvation of others, you may observe that they are actuated by the same kind of considerations as they are when they pray for themselves.

They are chiefly afraid of hell themselves, and when they are strongly convicted, they are afraid others will go there too. They are seeking 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 of sin which sinners are committing, as because they have such a sense of the terrors of hell to which sinners are going. It is not because sinners dishonor God that they want them converted, but because they are in danger. Their great object in praying is to secure the safety of those they pray for, as it is their great object in religion 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 they feel much more for the honor of God. They are more distressed to see God abused and dishonored than to see sinners go to hell. And if God must be forever dishonored or men go to hell--just as certainly as they love God supremely, they will decide that sinners shall sink to endless torments sooner than God fail of his due honor. And they manifest their true feelings in their prayers. You hear them praying for sinners as rebels against God, as guilty criminals deserving of eternal wrath, as the enemies of God and the universe; and while they are full of compassion for sinners, they feel also the enkindlings of holy indignation against them for their conduct towards the blessed God.

21. This class of professors I am speaking of are very apt to be distressed with doubts.

They are apt to talk a great deal about their doubts. This makes up a great part of their history, the detail of their doubts. The great thing with them being the enjoyment of a comfortable hope, as soon as they begin to doubt, it is all over with them, and so they make a great ado with their doubts, and then they are not prepared to do any thing for religion because they have these doubts. The true friends of God and man, being engaged in doing good, if the devil at any time suggests that they 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." I suppose a real Christian may have doubts. But they are much less apt to have them, by how much the more they are fully bent on saving sinners. It will be very hard work for Satan to get a church who are fully engaged in the work to be much troubled with doubts. Their attention is not on that, but on something else and he cannot get the advantage over them.

22. They manifest great uneasiness at the increasing calls for self-denial to do good.

Said an individual, "What will this Temperance Reformation come to? At first they only went against ardent spirit, and I gave up that, and did very well without it. Then they called on us to give up wine, and now they are calling on us to give up our tea and coffee and tobacco, and where will it end?" This class of persons are in constant distress at being called on to give up so much. The good that is to be done does not enter into their thoughts, because they are all the while dwelling on what they have to give up.

It is easily seen why it is that these aggressive movements on the kingdom of darkness distress such persons. Their object never was to search out and banish from this world every thing that is dishonorable to God or injurious to man. They never entered upon religion with the determination to clear out every such thing from the earth, as far as they had the power, and as fast as they were convinced that it was injurious to themselves or others, in soul or body. And therefore they are distressed by the movements of those who are truly engaged to search out and clear away every evil.

These persons are annoyed by the continually increasing calls to give for missions, Bibles, tracts, and the like. The time was, when if a rich man gave \$25 a year to such things, he was thought to be doing pretty well. But now there are so many calls for subscriptions and contributions, that they are in torment all the time. "I don't like these contributions, I am opposed to having contributions taken up in the congregation, I think they do hurt." They feel specially sore at these agents. "I don't know about these beggars that are going about." They are obliged to keep giving all the time, in order to keep up their character, or to have any hope, but they are much distressed about it, and don't know what the world is coming to, things are in such a strange pass.

As you raise the general standard of living in the church, this class of professors have to come up too, lest their hopes should be shaken. And the common standard of professors has been raised already so much,

that I have no doubt it costs this class of persons now four times as much of what they call religion, to keep up a hope, as it did twenty years ago. And what will become of them, if there are to be so many new movements and new measures, and so much done to save the world? The Lord help them, for they are in great distress!

23. When they are called upon to exercise self-denial for the sake of doing good, instead of being a pleasant thing, it gives them unmingled pain.

Such a one does not know any thing about enjoying self-denial. He cannot understand how self-denial is pleasant, or how any body can take pleasure in it, or have joy of heart in denying himself for the sake of doing good to others. That he thinks is a height in religion which he has not attained to. Yet the true friend of God and man, whose heart is fully set to do good, never enjoys any money he expends so well as that which he gives to promote Christ's kingdom. If he is really pious, he knows that is the best disposition he can make of his money. Nay, he is sorry to be obliged to use money for any thing else, when there are so many opportunities to do good with it.

I want you who are here to look at this. It is easy to see that if an individual has his heart very much set upon any thing, all the money he can save for that object is most pleasing to him, and the more he can save from other objects for this that his heart is set on, the better he is pleased. If an individual finds it hard for him to give money for religious objects, it is easy to see that his heart is not set on it. If it were, he would have given his money with joy. What would you think of a man who should set himself against giving money for the advancement of religion, and get up an excitement in the church about the missionary cause, and having so many calls for money, when he had never given five dollars? It would be absolute demonstration that his heart was not truly set on the cause of Christ. If it was, he would give his money for it, as free as water. And the more he could spare for it, the better he would be pleased.

24. This class of persons are not forward in promoting revivals.

This is not their great object. They always have to be dragged into the work. When a revival has begun, and gone on, and the excitement is great, then they come in and appear to be engaged in it. But you never see them taking the lead, or striking out ahead of the rest, and saying to the rest of the brethren, Come on, and let us do something for the Lord.

25. As a matter of fact, they do not convert sinners to God.

They may be instrumental of good, in various ways, and so may Satan be instrumental of good. But as a general thing, they do not pull sinners out of the fire. And the reason is, that this is not their great object. How is it with you? Do you absolutely succeed in converting sinners? Is there any one who will look to you as the instrument of his conversion? If you were truly engaged for this, you could not rest satisfied without doing it, and you would go about it so much in earnest, and with such agonizing prayer that you would do it.

26. They do not manifest much distress when they behold sin.

They do not rebuke it. They love to mingle in scenes where sin is committed. They love to be where they can hear vain conversation, and even to join in it. They love worldly company and worldly books. Their spirit is worldly. Instead of hating even the garment spotted with the flesh, they love to hang around the confines of sin, as if they had complacency in it.



27. They take but very little interest in published accounts of revivals, missions, &c.

If any of the missions are tried severely, they neither know nor feel it. If missions prosper, they never know it, they take no interest in it. Very likely they do not take any religious paper whatever. Or if they do, when they sit down to read it, if they come to a revival, they pass it over, to read the secular news, or the controversy, or something else. The other class, the true friends of God and man, on the contrary, love to learn the progress of revivals. They love to read a religious paper, and when they take it up, the first thing they do is to run their eye over it to find where there are revivals, and there they feast their souls and give glory to God. And so with missions, their heart goes forth with the missionaries, and when they hear that the Lord has poured forth His Spirit on a mission, they feel a glow of holy joy thrill through them.

28. They do not aim at any thing higher than a legal, painful, negative religion.

The love of Christ does not constrain them to a constant warfare against sin, and a constant watch to do all the good in their power. But what they do is done only because they think they must. And they maintain a kind of piety that is formal, heartless, worthless.

29. They come reluctantly into all the special movements of the church for doing good.

If a protracted meeting is proposed, you will generally find this class of persons hanging back, and making objections, and raising difficulties as long as they can. If any other special effort is proposed, they come reluctantly, and prefer the good old way. They feel sore at being obliged to add so much every year to their religion in order to maintain their hope.

30. They do not enjoy secret prayer.

They do not pray in their closets because they love to pray, but because they think it is their duty, and they dare not neglect it.

31. They do not enjoy the Bible

They do not read the Bible because it is sweet to their souls, sweeter than honey or the honey comb. They do not enjoy the reading, as a person enjoys the most exquisite delights. They read it because it is their duty to read it, and it would not do to profess to be a Christian and not read the Bible, but in fact they find it a dry book.

32. They do not enjoy prayer meetings.

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

33. They are very much put to it to understand what is meant by disinterestedness.

To serve God because they love Him, and not for the sake of the reward, is what they do not understand.

34. Their thoughts are not anxiously fixed upon the question, When shall the world be converted to God?

Their hearts are not agonized with such thoughts as this, O, how long shall wickedness prevail? O, when shall this wretched world be rid of sin and death? O, when shall men cease to sin against God? They think

much more of the question, When shall I die and go to heaven, and get rid of all my trials and cares?

But I find I am again obliged to omit the examination of the last class of professors till next Friday evening, when, with the leave of Providence, it will be attended to.

#### REMARKS.

1. I believe you will not think me extravagant, when I say that the religion I have described, appears to be the religion of a very large mass in the church.

To say the least, it is greatly to be feared that a majority of professing Christians are of this description. To say this is neither uncharitable nor censorious.

2. This religion is radically defective.

There is nothing of true Christianity in it. It differs as much from Christianity as much as the Pharisees differed from Christ--as much as gospel religion differs from legal religion.

Now, let me ask you, to which of these classes do you belong? Or are you in neither? It may be that because you are conscious you do not belong to the second class, you may think you belong to the first, when in fact you will find, when I come to describe the third class of professors, that is your true character.

How important it is that you know for a certainty what is your true character--whether you are actuated in religion by true love to God and man, or whether you are religious only out of regard to yourself. O, what a solemn thought, if this church, of which I have been the pastor, have never come to an intelligent decision of the question, whether they are the true friends of God and man or not. Do settle it, beloved. Now is the time. Settle this, and then go to work for God.

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