

Letter From Prof. Finney to Miss a.e. of Vermont.--No. 3.

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney discusses the custom of wearing mourning apparel, arguing that it is unnecessary expense and a stumbling-block to poor people, and that benevolence to the dead does not require it.

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-4, Isaiah 61:3, Matthew 5:16, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Philippians 4:6-7, Colossians 3:2, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, James 1:2-4, 1 Peter 5:7

Topics: "Mourning", "Christian Duty"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the topic of mourning apparel in his letter to Miss A.E. of Vermont, discussing the implications of conforming to societal customs during times of loss. He argues that wearing mourning clothes can be an unnecessary expense and a distraction from the spiritual lessons that death is meant to impart. Finney emphasizes the importance of benevolence and suggests that the decision to wear mourning should be guided by love for God and others, rather than mere tradition. He acknowledges the struggles of discerning one's duty in such matters and encourages reliance on Christ for guidance through these trials. Ultimately, he reminds the reader that the Christian life involves ongoing struggles that develop faith and character.

Transcript

Dear Sister A:

Your third enquiry relates to the subject of wearing mourning apparel. You say, "A brother once remarked in my presence that he felt it was wrong for people to change their dress at the loss of friends, or in other words, to put on mourning apparel." He thought it was conforming to the fashion of the world and therefore wrong; and also that it was unnecessary expense. These considerations led me to believe in the same way. He remarked further that he should be singular should his friends put it on. These remarks led me to feel so decided that I made the remark that should my mother be taken, I should put on no mourning, even if my friends did.--The first trial I had of these feelings was the removal of my dear mother. Well, what did I do but conform to the wishes of my friends, as they would not comply with mine. My dear brother, do you think I did wrong in view of all the circumstances of the case? I find if I once yield and do the thing that I thought was not right, I am left to doubt whether I was right."

Upon this I remark,

1. That my own habit and that of our family is to make no change in our dress on account of the loss of even nearest friends. Our reasons are these:

(a.) It is an unnecessary expense.

(b.) It is a great snare and a stumbling-block to poor people. The custom of wearing mourning often involves large but poor families deeply in debt. It often works an injury in many ways. A large but poor family if they comply with this custom must all have mourning at the loss of a relative. They are unable to pay, and a merchant might almost as well give them their mourning apparel as to let them have it on credit. Else he must really oppress them to get his pay. For the sake of the poor, therefore, I have thought it duty for Christians, at least my duty, with my views upon the subject to discountenance such a custom.

Again, it is unavoidable that the preparation of mourning apparel diverts the attention of the living from the great impression which God designed death to make upon them. Just at the time when God is speaking to them in so impressive a manner they must be all bustle in preparing their mourning dresses, they must go to the store--visit the milliner's and mantua-makers, and tailors; search the shops for hosiery; mourning rings, ribbands, and crapes must be had, and much attention must be paid to the cut and form of every thing; the greatly salutary lesson which God designed to teach them by his solemn providence is lost and worse than lost. Besides all this, it is no real respect for the dead.

But once more. Let us bring up the law which I have mentioned in my first two letters, and decide this custom in the light of it. Does benevolence to the dead require this? Would the departed spirit if allowed to speak, request that all this attention should be paid to the outward habiliments of mourning? If the soul has gone to heaven, would its happiness be increased by the mourner's expending so much time, thought and money upon dress? Could that soul on any account desire that this expense should be increased, or the attention be thus diverted from serious considerations? If the departed spirit has gone to hell, can we alleviate its sufferings by procuring mourning apparel?

Again, would benevolence to God lead us to do any such thing? Or would benevolence to the living require it? Is it demanded any way by the law of disinterested and universal benevolence? Yet in regard to this, let me say that I can conceive of circumstances in which this might be the less of two evils, and therefore expedient and right; for, let it be remembered, nothing is right in itself but disinterested benevolence--nothing wrong in itself but selfishness. Now if circumstances should occur in which the highest good seems plainly to demand that we use mourning apparel, then let us use it; otherwise, let us abstain from using it. Only have a single eye to the glory of God and the good of man, and you can form a right judgment as to your duty under any circumstances they may occur.

I have suggested that circumstances may occur in which the law of love will demand compliance with this custom. For example, you may be so situated that non-compliance would have so much the appearance of stubbornness, self-will, or some other evil temper, as to render it expedient to submit to the practice. Or your family or social relations may be such as to render it expedient. It may be best that a wife should comply with her husband's wishes; a daughter with the wishes of her parents.

As to the scruples you feel respecting this and the other questions you have proposed, let me remark that you need not expect to be able to settle all questions of duty without a struggle and a trial. It ought not to be expected that we shall become settled on many important questions of duty without that agonizing effort of mind which usually precedes our throwing ourselves unqualifiedly upon God for direction. The very fact that, doubt and uncertainty hang over the path of duty, awakening an earnest desire to know the

truth, produces a reaching, grasping, struggling, groaning, until the light of the Spirit, word and providence of God settle the mind in respect to his will. Do not count it strange therefore, my sister, that you should have these trials. They are a part of your Father's discipline. You know the way to get all your doubts resolved. Christ is your wisdom, your light, your life, your guide. He has promised to guide you by his eye. Your nature and circumstances are such that it will often cost you a struggle to penetrate the darkness that may enshroud some important question of duty. Let this never discourage or stumble you. You will find questions of higher and still higher import thrown before your mind as you advance in knowledge and conformity to the will of God. Remember you must agonize to enter the strait gate--the whole Christian life is a warfare with temptation and a struggle with difficulties, embarrassing questions, and multitudes of thing designed to develop to the utmost our patience, faith, love, hope, our sympathy with Christ in his humiliation, and thus prepare us to share with him in his glory. It is one of the grossest mistakes for Christians to expect ever in this life to get permanently beyond the struggles and agonizing conflicts which God intends for their discipline and development. Let no one expect it. It is enough for the servant that he be as his Master. Christ had trials of his faith, his patience, and all his graces. He learned obedience, we are told by the things which he suffered. Let it not be inferred from this that Christ sinned, nor should it ever be inferred that any being on trial sins because he has these struggles. These befell Christ as a man; so they may befall ourselves as human beings needing that development which discipline gives and which nothing else can give. The graces of the man Christ Jesus, needed development as well as ours, and his Heavenly Father attained it in the same way with him as with us. But I cannot say more on this subject at present. Let us be cheerfully willing to follow in his footsteps, and count it all joy when like him we fall into divers temptations, perplexities, and discouragements, remembering that the trials of our faith worketh patience.

Your Brother,

C.G. FINNEY

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