

# Letter From Prof. Finney to Miss a.e. of Vermont

by Charles Finney

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*Charles Finney emphasizes the importance of following the law of benevolence and the will of God as revealed in providence, rather than making binding resolutions that may conflict with circumstances.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 3:5

**Topics:** "God's Providence", "The Nature of Promises"

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## Description

Charles Finney addresses Miss A.E. of Vermont, emphasizing the importance of aligning one's resolutions and promises with God's providence rather than rigidly adhering to them. He explains that making promises about devotional practices can become a snare if they conflict with one's circumstances and duties. Finney encourages a focus on benevolence and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, rather than being bound by self-imposed obligations. He asserts that true devotion comes from a heart filled with love for God, not from mere compliance with resolutions. Ultimately, he reminds her that God's providence is a continuous revelation of His will, guiding our actions and decisions.

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## Transcript

Dear Sister:

Your interesting communication is just received and read. I am pressed with many duties and cannot answer so much in detail as I could wish. You suggest that an answer in the Oberlin Evangelist would be acceptable. As I am receiving many letters containing similar inquires, I think it may be well to reply as briefly as may be through the columns of that paper, since an answer to your questions will be also an answer to the many inquiries upon the same topics. I will reply to them in their order.

Your first inquiry respects sundry resolutions and promises which you have made, but not kept, and which therefore have been a snare to your soul. Among other things, you resolved and promised to observe certain hours for prayer and devotional exercises. Some of these promises you wrote down. If I understand you, they are all much of the same character. You say, "I then formed many resolutions that I would and would not do thus and so. Some of them I put into writing, and sought the grace of God to enable me to keep them. These I have not kept; for example, regular hours of prayer. For some time after I formed these resolutions, when the hour came I would leave my work and attend to those duties, sometimes doubtful whether I was doing right to leave my work. Now I endeavor to attend to those duties

just as I think my heavenly Father would have me. I pay more regard to convenience. In so doing, do I regard self?"

In answering this part of your letter, I observe first, that you had no right to make a resolution either orally or in writing, appropriating certain hours to devotional exercises, irrespective of the circumstances under which the providence of God might place you. Multitudes of instances might occur in which observance of those hours would interfere with other manifest duties. In these cases, it could not be your duty to observe those hours in the manner which you had promised. Now as you had no right to make such a promise as this, it cannot be binding. Otherwise you might, by promising to do a certain thing, render it obligatory to do that thing, although it might, under the circumstances, be wrong; which is equivalent to saying, that by promising to commit a sin, you can make it your duty to commit it; which again would be the same thing as to say that it is your duty to commit sin; or in other words, that you sin in doing your duty, or in other words, that sin is no sin, or in other words still, that sin and duty are the same thing--which is absurd.

2. The spirit of a promise to observe certain hours for devotion, is simply this--that providence permitting--that health and all the circumstances rendering it consistent with the great law of benevolence; such and such hours shall be appropriated to such duties. If any thing more than this is intended by such a promise, the promise is unlawful. If you really doubted whether you did right in leaving your work, you did not do right. "He that doubteth, is damned if he eat;" that is, whosoever does that, the lawfulness of which he doubts, is condemned unless he as really and strongly doubts the lawfulness of the opposite course. Perhaps by your resolution you had placed yourself in precisely this predicament. You doubted whether you did right to leave your work, and perhaps as strongly, or more strongly, doubted the lawfulness of not keeping your resolution. In this case, if you acted conscientiously according as you viewed the subject with the best light you had, you ought not to regard yourself as being condemned for the course you took.

3. Such resolutions and promises are very frequently a great snare and stumbling-block to the soul. The reason is this: the unalterable, and only rule by which we are to be governed and by which we are to ascertain our duty on every occasion, is that of disinterested, perfect, and universal benevolence. Now this is right in itself, and let it be forever understood, that nothing in the universe is right in itself, but disinterested, perfect, and universal benevolence. This is the unalterable and only law of right.

Again, let it be forever understood that nothing is wrong in itself but selfishness; that is, the disposition to self-gratification. Every act of every kind that can have any moral character at all, every state of mind, and every omission that can have any moral character at all, is either right or wrong, as it is conformed to the law of benevolence or to the law of selfishness. Selfishness is always wrong, and every thing that proceeds therefrom. Benevolence is always right and every thing that proceeds therefrom. I mean by this, that all those outward actions and states of mind that necessarily follow from benevolence or selfishness, so far as they can have any moral character at all, are right or wrong simply because, and in so far as they are conformed to either of these laws. Now the question whether any particular action or thing is right or wrong, can be decided only by bringing all the circumstances of the case into the light of the law of love, always remembering that nothing is right or wrong in itself, but conformity or non-conformity to this law. Now whether it may be your duty to appropriate a certain hour to rest or exercise, to sleep, to prayer, to refreshment, to labor, to recreation, to study, to meditation, to visiting the poor, to taking care of the sick, or in any of the ten thousand other supposable ways, will depend entirely upon the circumstances of the case, and you should never promise to do or omit any thing that may be inconsistent with the circumstances in which Providence may place you. Your business is to be at all times wholly devoted to God, to be perfectly and disinterestedly benevolent, and let the employment of every hour be such as

seems, with the best light you have, to be most for the honor of God and the advancement of his kingdom. This is the rule and the only rule of right; and all tying yourself up to any other course than this is wrong. It will be a snare to your soul.

Again, prayer and devotional exercises are the privileges of the Christian, and not things that he must be whipped up to, by resolutions, oaths, and vows. If your heart is full of love, you will not need oaths or vows to lead you to pray. If it is not, you will never discharge your duty by complying with an oath, and spending an hour in mocking God. It is always well to observe stated seasons for every duty, so far as we consistently can; but our circumstances are often such that very few duties can be uniformly attended to at any given hour. Let us be watchful, and sure to pray enough, and attend to every thing in its proper time and place, and not suffer Satan to bring us into bondage in any of these matters.

My sister, the same God that wrote the Bible, the same God that works within us by the voice and leading of his Spirit, is the same God that administers universal and particular providence in the world around us. The inward leadings of his Spirit and the written word, are never inconsistent with his providential dispensations. We want to know what the will of God is, respecting the disposal of our time and efforts every moment. His providential dealings are designed to afford us opportunity for developing and carrying out the great law of benevolence written in our hearts. This providence therefore, is to be regarded as a revelation of his will as to our duty every hour. Now for us to set up a resolution that we will or will not do this or that, is to make a standard and rule of our own--is to be self-willed, to disregard the voice of God and lean to our own understanding. In this we set aside the authority of God, under the pretence of piously keeping a resolution. The fact is, it is infidelity to deny or overlook the truth, that Providence is a continual revelation of the will of God in respect to us. My dear sister, let us remember that providence is nothing else than a great book of divine revelation, in which we are passing over successive chapters, verses, and pages day by day; and this providence. so far as we are able to understand it, is just as binding upon us as a written revelation, or as if God should utter his will in an audible voice from heaven. We have no right therefore, to make any promise or resolution whatever, that may clash with the providential revelations of the will of God in respect to our time and hourly duties. Let this suffice, my sister, for an answer to your first inquiry. In the next number, God willing, you will find an answer to your second inquiry.

Your brother;

C.G. FINNEY

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