

Nature of True Virtue

by Charles Finney

True virtue is defined as benevolence, which is a voluntary and intentional choice to will the good of being.

Scripture: Romans 13:8

Topics: "Benevolence", "True Virtue"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that true virtue is rooted in benevolence, which is the will to promote the good of all beings. He distinguishes this biblical love from natural affection, complacency, and mere emotions, asserting that genuine love is voluntary, disinterested, and universal. Finney argues that all moral actions must stem from this benevolence, as it is the essence of fulfilling God's law and the foundation of true religion. He warns against equating feelings or desires with true virtue, highlighting that real love manifests in actions aimed at the well-being of others. Ultimately, Finney concludes that benevolence is not only the essence of virtue but also the source of peace and joy in one's life.

Transcript

Owe no man any thing, but to love one another; for he that loveth another, hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.--Rom. 13: 8-10.

For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.--Gal. 5: 14.

In this lecture I propose to show,

I. WHAT IS INTENDED BY THE TERM LOVE.

II. THAT THE THING INTENDED IS THE WHOLE OF VIRTUE.

I. What is intended by the term love.

It is of the utmost importance to understand the bible meaning of the term love. It is represented in the text, and the Bible generally, as the substance of all religion, and the only preparation for heaven. What can be more important?

1. I remark, then, in the first place, that the love required in the text is not what is generally called natural affection or the love of kindred. This is manifest (1.) From the fact that natural affection is involuntary. It is true the will is employed in acting out this love, but the thing generally intended by natural affection is the strong constitutional impulses experienced by parents towards their offspring, brothers and sisters towards one another, &c. But (2.) This natural affection is common to both saints and sinners, and certainly nothing can be religion which is common to the ungodly with the saints. (3.) And I may add that it is participated by brutes.

2. This love is not complacency or esteem. Complacency is that pleasant emotion, or state of the sensibility which is experienced when we see any thing which, from the laws of our constitution, is naturally pleasing to us. For example. If you contemplate a beautiful natural scenery, you experience a pleasing emotion, or delight, from the very nature of your constitution. It is precisely the same in contemplating moral beauty. Men are so constituted that whenever they contemplate a virtuous character, provided it does not in any way conflict with their selfishness, they delight in it--a pleasurable emotion always springs up of course. Now this complacency, or esteem of virtuous character, is perfectly involuntary, and therefore can have no virtue in it. This we know by consciousness which I defined in my last lecture to be the mind's knowledge of its own existence, acts, and states, and of the liberty or necessity of these acts and states. By consciousness then we know that this complacency in the character, either in God or any other virtuous being, is involuntary, and the natural and necessary result of the mental constitution, when brought into certain relations to such characters. Again, this complacency cannot be true virtue, or the love required in the Bible, because it can with propriety be exercised only towards the virtuous, whereas the love which the Bible requires is to be exercised towards all. We are not required to exercise complacency towards sinners, and it would plainly be unjust and absurd if we were, since to delight in a sinful character is impossible. But the text requires universal love. Therefore the love which it requires and complacency cannot be identical. Again, complacency is common to real saints, and to the self-deceived, and impenitent. Much evil is done by denying that sinners have this feeling of complacency towards God and his law, when the fact is they know that they have. Whenever they see the character of God aside from his relation to themselves, they cannot avoid it. It arises by a natural necessity from the mental constitution. The wickedest devil in hell would experience it, if he could view the character of God aside from its relations to himself. It is absurd to deny that mind would feel thus, for if it would not, it must be inconsistent with itself, which cannot be. Furthermore complacency in virtuous character is consistent with the highest degree of wickedness. It is related of a certain infidel that he would go into ecstasies in contemplating the character of God, and who has not heard the wicked insist on it that they do love God, and found it almost impossible to convince them that they did not love Him with any virtuous love? Why? Because they are conscious of these emotions of complacency towards Him, and mistake it for real benevolence.

3. The love required in the text is not what is commonly called fondness, for this is a mere emotion and therefore involuntary. I know not what else to call a certain development of the mind towards God. Persons often exhibit a fondness towards God, the same as towards any other being. They love Him because He loves them just as sinners peculiarly love those who do them a good turn. And they do not distinguish between this and true religion; but immediately after the strongest exhibition of it, take advantage of a neighbor in trade, or exhibit selfishness in some other form.

The truth is, it often consists with the most fiendish wickedness, as also with the highest irreverence. Persons in this state of mind often seem, in conversing about Him, in their prayers to Him and in every

way to regard and treat God merely as an equal. I have often thought how infinitely insulting to Him their conduct must be. Again this fondness is consistent with any degree of self-indulgence. In direct connection with its exercise, persons often show themselves to be the perfect slaves of their appetites and passions. They undoubtedly feel their fondness, but do they love? They say they love, but is their love benevolence? Is it religion? Can that be religion which puts no restraint on the appetites and passions, or only curbs some of them, while it cleaves the more tenaciously to others? Impossible!

4. The love intended in the text is not synonymous with desire. Persons say they desire to love God--they desire to love their neighbor as themselves. No doubt they do, but there is no religion in this, since desire is constitutional and has no moral character. Sinners have the desire and remain sinners still, and every one knows that they are consistent with the highest wickedness. Besides, as it is mere desire, it may exist forever and do no good. Suppose God had from all eternity merely desired to create a universe and make it happy. If He had never gone further than that what good would it have done? So it will not do for us to say to our neighbors be ye warmed, and be ye fed, but give them not those things which are essential to their well being. Unless we really will what we desire, it will never effect any good.

5. The love required in the text is not pity or compassion to individuals. This is wholly constitutional, and men are strongly exercised with it in spite of themselves. It is related of Whitefield that he often appealed to men with such power in behalf of his orphan-house as to induce those to give liberally who had beforehand determined not to give, nor to be influenced by him. The truth is, his mighty appeals aroused the constitutional susceptibility of pity to such a pitch that they had to give out of self-defense. They were wrought up to such an agony that they had to give to relieve it. But so far was this mere excitement from being virtuous, that perhaps those very persons whom it induced to give the money, called themselves a thousand fools for having done so, after the excitement subsided.

6. Nor is the love required in the text delight in the happiness of mankind. We are so constituted as naturally to delight in the happiness of others, whenever there is no selfish reason to prevent. It is this same constitutional tendency which produces such abhorrence of whatever is unjust and injurious. For example: How men's feelings of indignation swell and boil on witnessing acts of injustice. Suppose, in a court of justice, a judge perverts justice, shamefully wronging the innocent, and clearing the guilty. How would the spectators feel? There was a case, sometime since, in one of our cities, where a man had been guilty of a flagrant outrage, but when it was brought before the court, the justice so insulted and abused the sufferer and showed such a disposition to clear the guilty, that the indignation of the spectators became aroused to such a degree that they could hardly be restrained from seizing, and wreaking their vengeance on him. And these were persons who made no pretensions to religion. So men universally, whether virtuous or not, abhor a liar, or the character of the devil. Who ever contemplated the character of the devil, as it really is, without abhorring it? On the contrary, men universally, whether virtuous themselves or not, admire and delight in virtuous characters. Take, for example, the Jews in Christ's time. How they admired, and manifested their delight in the character of the prophets who had formerly perished by the violence of their contemporaries. Now how was this? Why, they now saw the true character of those prophets, without its sustaining such a relation to their selfishness as to annoy them and their constitutional delight was naturally awakened in this way. But at the same time they were treating Christ in the same manner that their fathers, treated those prophets and for the same reason. So now multitudes join in admiring and praising such men as Whitefield, and Wesley, and Edwards, who, if they had lived in their day, would have cried as loud as their contemporaries did--'away with them.' Now, why is this? Because the relations of the characters of these men to the world are now changed, and do not directly

cross the track of their selfishness, as they did while living. The same principle is manifested in respect to human freedom. For example: Some years ago, during the struggle of the Greeks for their freedom, what enthusiasm prevailed--what earnestness to go and help them. The government could scarcely control the waves of excitement in their favor. But those very men, who were so enthusiastic in behalf of the Greeks, would now hiss at any error to remove slavery from this country! Now why is this? Because, I say again, men are so constituted that when no selfish reason exists to prevent it, men naturally delight in happiness, and sympathize with the suffering. But there is no virtue in this. It is mere natural emotion which is consistent with the highest wickedness.

7. The love required is not a good will to any particular individuals. 'Do not even sinners love those that love them?' They love their friends and partizans, and so do fallen spirits for ought I know, but there is no benevolence in this.

8. This love then must be benevolence. But what is benevolence? It is benevolence--willing the good of being. The attributes of benevolence are,

(1.) Voluntariness. It belongs to the will, and not to the sensibility.

(2.) Another attribute is disinterestedness. By this, I mean that the good of being is not willed for the sake of its reflex influence upon self, but for its own sake. It is recognizing the good of being as valuable in itself, and willing it for that reason. The willing terminates on the good willed.

(3.) Universality, is another attribute of benevolence. It goes out towards all beings. It admits of no exceptions. Wherever there is a being capable of happiness, benevolence wills its happiness, according to its perceived value and for its own sake. Such is God's benevolence. It is universal, embracing in its infinite bosom all beings from the highest arch angel to the sparrow which falls to the ground. He views and really wills the happiness of every being as a good. Indeed, universality is essential to the very nature of benevolence, for if good is willed on its own account, benevolence will of course cover all good known.

(4.) Another attribute is unity. Benevolence is a simple principle. It is the whole heart--an unmixed general choice, as the good of being is a unity--it is a single end, and benevolence is the choice of this one end.

(5.) It is a choice as distinguished from volition. The choice of an end always of course necessitates volitions to accomplish the end, but these executive volitions have no character in themselves, and all virtue or vice belongs to the choice or intention which they are designed to execute. We know this by consciousness.

(6.) It is a choice also as distinguished from desire, emotion, or feeling. As I said in the former lecture, we are conscious that all the states of the sensibility--all desires, emotions, and passions whatever are involuntary, and therefore without moral character. Benevolence then, cannot either wholly or partly consist in these.

(7.) Another attribute is activity and efficiency. Benevolence being choice it must be efficient. Choice necessitates volition. For example; Suppose I intend to go to the post-office as soon as possible. While this choice remains, it of course necessitates all the volitions necessary to its execution. Its very nature is activity.

(8.) Aggressiveness is another attribute of benevolence. Of course if benevolence is willing the good of being, it wills the destruction of whatever prevents that good, and continually makes encroachments in

every direction upon every form of wickedness however fortified. It will not only sally out against such sins as licentiousness, intemperance, and profanity, but every form of selfishness however popular it may be.

(9.) Benevolence is a disposition, or ultimate intention. Intention is the choice of an end. Benevolence is the choice of the highest good of being, and being the ultimate choice, as was illustrated in the last lecture, it is of course a disposition to promote good to the utmost.

(10.) It is supreme to God of course. Benevolence as we have already said, is willing the good of being for its own sake. Of course then it is willing the good of every being, according to its perceived value, for it is agreed by all, to be the correct definition of virtue that it is a disposition to regard things according to their perceived relative value. Now every one must perceive that the happiness of God is the greatest good in the universe, and therefore benevolence must, as a matter of course, will it supremely.

(11.) Benevolence must be equal to men. I do not mean to say that the happiness of every man is equal to the happiness of every other man or that they are equally valuable. The happiness of a man is of more value than the happiness of a brute. It would therefore be unjust to regard them as equal. So some men are of more value than others. For example, the life of Washington was of more value than that of any private soldier; therefore, if either of them must be sacrificed, it should be the least valuable. But what I mean to say is that the good of every being is to be regarded according to its relative value as you understand it.

(12.) Benevolence also regards the good of enemies, as well as friends. The Savior insists on this as essential to virtue.

9. That this love is benevolence is generally agreed, and it is also agreed that this is the only form of love which is voluntary, or can reasonably be commanded. That this, and no other kind of love is voluntary, every one knows by his own consciousness. We are conscious that our emotions are all produced, not directly but indirectly. If a parent, for example, wishes to feel about his family, he must direct his attention to them. The result will be that he will feel about them by a natural necessity, and his feelings will take the type of whatever aspect he views them in. And while his attention is fixed upon them he cannot but feel. So with every form of love except benevolence. Hatred is produced and perpetuated in the same way. An individual conceives himself injured by another, and keeps his attention upon it; the more he views it, the more emotions of hatred or indignation are felt, so that when urged to give it up, he says he cannot. And it is true that while he keeps his eye upon that particular thing--while his mind broods over it, he cannot; but he can turn his attention off and thus indirectly remove his feelings of hatred or indignation.

10. The love required in the text must be benevolence as it is required towards all beings. This is manifest from what we have already said.

11. God's love to us must be benevolence. It could not be complacency, for instead of feeling complacent towards sinners, he must abhor their character. It was benevolence then which made the Atonement, and all the provisions of salvation.

12. No other kind of love would do any real good. Without it God would never have made the Atonement, nor have done any thing else to secure the salvation of sinners, nor would any other moral being. No other love can in the nature of things be universal than benevolence, which consists in willing universal good for its own sake.

13. Benevolence is naturally and universally obligatory, and therefore must be virtue. The good of being is valuable, and therefore to will it must be virtue. To deny this is to talk stark nonsense. It is to deny that we are to treat things as they are, or according to the nature.

14. Therefore the law of God must require it, and would be unjust if it did not. It cannot be otherwise than unjust not to require all moral beings to act according to the nature and relations of things.

15. Nothing else need be required of moral beings, as every thing else possible to us follows its exercise of necessity. This follows from the fact that it consists in choice. If I will right, this will secure corresponding volitions, muscular movements, desires, and feelings as a matter of course, and whatever willing will not secure is impossible to me. To produce the right emotions, I have only to fix my attention on the right objects. If therefore I will right the whole man will be right of course. That such is the influence of the will we know by consciousness.

16. In short nothing more nor less can be justly required. That nothing less can be required is a certain intuition of every moral being in the universe. Ask whomsoever you will if every one ought not to be required to will the universal good of being, and if he understands the terms of your proposition, he will immediately cry out, "yes," "yes," from the deepest recesses of his soul. That nothing more can be required is equally intuitive. Whenever it is asserted that men can be required to do any thing beyond the power of their will, the nature of every moral being cries out against it as false. This is right and nothing else is right.

II. Benevolence is the whole of virtue.

1. We have seen that this love is disposition or intention.

2. We know that intention necessitates corresponding states and acts.

3. Virtue cannot consist in the outward act, nor, in necessitated mental acts. It must therefore consist in benevolence and this the Bible teaches in many ways.

(1.) In the text, it is asserted that love is the fulfilling of the law, and that all the law is fulfilled in one word even this, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

(2.) It is the spirit of the whole law as epitomized by Christ--'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy strength and with all thy mind and thy neighbor as thyself.'

(3.) It is the spirit of every precept of the Bible. It asserts that 'if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not,' that is, a right intention obeys the very spirit of the Bible. If we intend right, the will is taken for the deed. Suppose my intention is to do all the good I possibly can, but I am confined to a sick bed so that I can accomplish but little; notwithstanding I am virtuous. So, on the other hand, the Bible teaches that if people intend wrong, their moral character is as their intention, whatever they may do. Even if good should result from their actions, no thanks to them because they did not intend it.

4. All the attributes of Christian character are only modifications of benevolence but this will appear more fully in several

REMARKS.

1. It may be said that the Bible represents our words, thoughts, and outward actions as virtuous. Answer;
 - (1.) The Bible makes all virtue strictly speaking to consist in love, and it cannot be inconsistent with itself.
 - (2.) Words, thoughts, and outward actions are and can be virtuous only in the sense of their being manifestations of benevolence.
 - (3.) The same may be said in regard to words, thoughts, and actions that are called wicked. The Bible says that 'the ploughing of the wicked is sin.' Words, thoughts, and actions are holy or sinful in no other sense than that they indicate the state of the will. A word! What is a word? A breath--a motion of the atmosphere on the drum of the ear. Can this have moral character in itself? No, but it may be an index of the state of mind of him who utters it.
 2. See the infinite importance of understanding that benevolence always and necessarily manifests itself--consisting in choice it is naturally impossible that it should not.
 3. See the spurious nature of any religion which does not manifest itself in efforts to do good. Such religion is mere antinomianism. It may be some kind of happiness, but religion it is not.
 4. All the attributes of Christian character must belong to the will, just as all God's moral attributes are only modifications of benevolence. They are not modifications of emotion, but of will. His justice in sending the wicked to hell is as much a modification of benevolence, as is his mercy in taking the virtuous to heaven. He does both for the same reason, because the general good equally demands both. So with all that the true Christian does.
 5. How false and dangerous are the usual definitions of these attributes. For example: Love is spoken of as a mere feeling. Hence religion is represented as, at one time, like smothered embers, scarcely in existence; at another, in a slight glow, which may be fanned till it breaks out into flame. Now this is not the love which the Bible requires, since it is nothing but mere feeling, and even if legitimately produced, it is only the natural and constitutional result of religion, and not religion itself.
- Repentance is also spoken of as mere sorrow for sin, but instead of this, it does not consist in feeling at all. It is a change of mind. As we say, when we have made up our mind to do one thing, and then change it, and do the opposite, we say in popular language, "I changed my mind." This is the simple idea of repentance. It is an act of the will, and sorrow follows it as a result. So faith is represented as the conviction of the intellect. But this cannot be faith, for the Bible every where represents faith as a virtue, and it must, therefore, be an act of the will, and no mere belief whatever. It is a committing of the soul to God. The Bible says Christ did not commit himself to certain persons, for He knew what was in them, that is, He did not trust or exercise faith in them. The word rendered commit here, is the same as that rendered faith. Peter says, 'Commit the keeping of your souls to Him in well doing as to a faithful Creator.' When the mind apprehends the true meaning of the characteristics and relations of Christ to the world, this is often mistaken for faith. But the devil may have as good faith as that. This is a mere perception of truth by the intellect, and is, as a condition, indispensable to faith, but it is no more faith itself than an act of the intellect is an act of the will.
- So humility is represented as a sense of guilt, and unworthiness. Now, Satan is doubtless humble if this is humility, and so is every convicted sinner, by a natural necessity. But humility is a willingness to be known and esteemed according to your true character. These illustrations will show how dangerous are the

mistakes prevalent respecting the attributes of Christian character.

6. There is no such thing as religion, not in exercise. Persons often talk as though they had some true religion about them, although they are conscious of exercising none. They have a good enough religion to be sure, but it is not in operation just now. Now this is a radical mistake.

7. How many persons are living on frames and feelings, and yet remain perfectly selfish.

8. Many are satisfied with no preaching but such as fans into existence certain happy emotions. These are a kind of religious epicures. Whenever we preach so as to lay bare the roots of selfishness and detect its secret workings, they are not fed. They say this is not the gospel, let us have the gospel. But what do they mean by the gospel? Why simply that class of truths that create and fan into a flame their emotions. And those who most need to be searched are often most unwilling to endure the probe. They make their religion to consist in emotions, and if these are taken away what have they left? hence they cling to them with a death grasp. Now let me say that these emotions have not one particle of religion in them, and those who want simply that class of truths which fan them into existence are mere religious epicures, and their view of the gospel is sheer antinomianism. If the world were full of such religion it would be none the better for it.

9. Religion is the cause of happiness but is not identical with it. Happiness is a state of the sensibility and of course involuntary, while religion is benevolence and therefore powerful action.

10. Men may work without benevolence, but they cannot be benevolent without works. Many persons wake up occasionally, and bluster about, get up protracted meetings, and make mighty efforts to work themselves into a right state of feeling by dint of mere friction. But they never get a right spirit thus, and their working is mere legality. I do not mean to condemn protracted meetings, nor special efforts to promote religion, but I do condemn a legal engaging in these things. But while persons may work without benevolence, it is also certain that if they are benevolent they will work. It is impossible that benevolence should be inactive.

11. If all virtue consists in the ultimate intention, then it must be that we can be conscious of our spiritual state. We certainly can tell what we are aiming at. If consciousness does not reveal this it cannot reveal any thing about our character. If character consists in ultimate intention, and if we cannot be conscious what this intention is, it follows necessarily that we can know nothing whatever about our own character.

12. We can see what we are to inquire after in our hours of self-examination. Our inquiry should not be how we feel, but for what end we live--what is the aim of our life.

13. How vain is religion without love. Those who have such a religion are continually lashed up by conscience to the performance of duty. Conscience stands like a task-master, scourge in hand, points to the duty, and says it must not be omitted. The heart shrinks back from its performance, but still it must be done or worse evil endured. The hesitating soul drags itself up by resolution, to fulfill the letter of the requirement, while there is no acquiescence in its spirit, and thus a miserable slavery is substituted for the cheerful obedience of the heart.

14. I must close by saying that benevolence naturally fills the mind with peace and joy. Mind was made to be benevolent, and whenever it is so it is in harmony with itself, with God and the Universe. It wills just as God wills, and therefore it naturally and cheerfully acts out his will. This is its choice. It is like some

heavenly instrument whose chords are touched by some angelic hand which makes music for the ear of God. But on the contrary, a selfish man is necessarily, from the very nature of mind, a wretched man. His reason and conscience continually affirm his obligations to God and his universe, to the world and the Church. But he never wills in accordance with it, and thus a continual warfare is kept up within. His mind is like an instrument untuned and harsh. Instead of harmony, it renders only discord, and makes music only fit to mingle with the wailings of the damned.

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