

On Being Holy

by Charles Finney

God requires us to be holy because he is holy, and we must rely on Christ and his strength to become holy.

Scripture: Matthew 5:48, Romans 12:1, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 1:16

Topics: "Holiness", "Moral Purity"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the call to holiness as a fundamental aspect of the Christian life, rooted in the command 'Be ye holy, for I am holy' from 1 Peter 1:16. He explains that holiness is synonymous with moral purity and perfect love, requiring a voluntary alignment with God's moral law. Finney argues that self-respect and happiness are intrinsically linked to holiness, as true fulfillment can only be found in a life that reflects God's character. He warns against the false hope of unconverted individuals who believe they can attain heaven without holiness, stressing that true sanctification comes through faith in Christ. Ultimately, he encourages believers to actively pursue holiness, assuring them that God supports their efforts to become holy.

Transcript

"Be ye holy, for I am holy." 1 Peter 1:16

This precept enjoins holiness, and our first business should therefore be to enquire what holiness is. It is plain that the Bible uses the term as synonymous with moral purity; but the question will still return--What is moral purity?

I answer--Moral fitness; that which we see to be morally appropriate; it is in substance, moral propriety; in other words--perfect love; such as God requires. It is sympathy with God and likeness to him;--the state of mind that God has. Holiness in God is not a part of his nature in such a sense that it is not voluntary in him; but it is a voluntary exercise and state of his mind.

The same is true of all beings. Holiness is not a thing of nature as opposed to free action, but must always be a free and a moral thing. It is not possible to any beings but such as are made in the image of God in the sense of being moral agents. They must have free will, and then must voluntarily conform themselves to rectitude. Nothing less or other than a voluntary conformity of themselves to the moral law can be holiness. In them all, holiness is that state of mind which is precisely appropriate to their nature and relations. This state is expressed in one word--love, meaning by this, benevolence--good will to all. When this term is used in its widest sense, it includes all moral duty. Hence this command to be holy requires

that we bring ourselves into a moral adjustment to God and our entire moral duty.

Why should we be holy?

God, as in our text, requires it. "It is written--'Be ye holy, for I am holy.'"

The context also combines with the text to enforce the duty by God's example. "As he who hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation"--according to the ancient precept--"Be ye holy, for I am holy." Because I am holy, therefore be ye holy likewise.

Our Lord enforced the same duty by the same reason; (Matt. v:48) "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect."

What are the reasons of this requirement?

1. We cannot but require it of ourselves. Our own nature irresistibly demands it of us--his own individual conscience of every moral agent. There is no moral agent whose nature does not require holiness of himself. Each one is so constituted that it is impossible he should not require this of himself. Hence there must always be a war in his own bosom unless he yields to this demand. He knows he ought to, and therefore, by a necessity as strong as his own nature, he must become holy, or fail of peace and conscious self-approval.

No moral agent can respect himself unless he is holy. He may be careless and thoughtless; and may thus slide over and past some of the self-reproach he must otherwise feel for unholiness; but he can never have any honest self-respect unless he behaves himself in a comely and decent way which he believes to be in his circumstances right.

Need I urge that self-respect is a thing of very great importance? Few are fully aware how very important self-respect is to themselves and to others. Let a young man lose his self-respect, and what is he? What hope can you have of his stability and manliness? A young woman void of self-respect, is no longer herself. Who does not know how complete she falls from her position as a virtuous woman!

This form of self-respect pertains to our relations to this world and to society; but suppose a moral agent in like manner, to lose his self-respect towards God. How fearful must be the influence of this loss on his heart! How reckless of moral rectitude he becomes in all that pertains to his Maker!

Or suppose God to lose his self-respect. Suppose he should cease to do what is honorable to himself, and should no longer care to act in a manner worthy of his own esteem. How fearful must be the consequences first to himself, and next to his whole universe! Suppose him to be morally impure, no longer adjusting his conduct to his own standard of right. It shocks us unutterably to conceive of God as acting in a way unworthy of himself. We know how keenly every sensitive and right-minded being feels the disgrace of having consciously acted in a way unworthy of himself. Those who have been conscious of this pain have often thought how God must feel, if, with his infinite sensibilities, he should act unworthy of himself. You sometimes experience this feeling and therefore know how you loathe yourself and have no peace or rest in your soul.

It is true that these considerations may have but little weight with those who know nothing of holiness, and who have never cultivated their own right feelings and sentiments; but those of you who have been near to God and have had your "heart sprinkled from an evil conscience," must appreciate it.

2. Another reason why we should be holy is, that God requires it of us. He has made us in his own image--like himself in the attributes of intellect, sensibility and free-will; and therefore for the same reasons that make him require holiness of himself, he must require it of us. He must require it of us because it is his duty to do so.

He requires us to be holy because he cannot make us happy unless we will become holy. Our nature being what it is, it is forever impossible that we should be happy without being holy. God is happy, because he is holy; He knows that we exist under the same law of nature and necessity; hence his benevolence prompts, nay compels him to use this necessary means of securing our happiness.

REMARKS.

1. Sinners know they are not holy. All know this, yet many often say--What have I done so very bad? No matter whether very bad, (judged by the popular standard,) or not; you know you are not holy. Now do not suppose yourself to be holy as God is holy. You know there is none of this character in you. How much soever confused men's sentiments on this subject may be, it is universally true that they conceive of God as being holy in a sense in which they are not themselves. Whatever they may say of it, they know this.

2. The hope that unconverted people often have that they shall be saved, is utterly without foundation. Many try to think they have not done anything so bad that they deserve to be sent to hell!

How strange that such men should think themselves fit for heaven! Christ said--"Marvel not that I said unto you, ye must be born again." No marvel that men should need a radical change! Hearts so foreign from love, so full of selfishness--how can such hearts dwell in heaven! The unholy man's hope of heaven--how utterly absurd! What nonsense that men should cherish such hopes without any holiness to fit them for it! Just as if heaven were a certain place, of no peculiar character, and to go there would be to ensure one's bliss! You know better! You know something about the business and the delights of the Christian--you know they are such as you delight not in. The Sabbath is no privilege to you. Rather you exclaim, "behold, what a weariness it is!" Social worship has no spiritual attractions for you. How then can you suppose that heaven would be a world of joy to you?

3. Many who know they must become holy, are yet very ignorant of the way in which they are to become so. Having begun in the Spirit, they try to become perfect in the flesh. Their reliance is more on resolutions, than on Christ embraced by faith. A leading minister of the Presbyterian church, not long since, heard a sermon showing that men are sanctified by receiving Christ into the heart by faith. He remarked--"We are just beginning to receive this doctrine. We have a long time been trying to become holy by resolution."

Of many it is true that all their efforts are by works of law. They seem not to know that all the efforts they make without Christ avail nothing save only sin.

4. Pardon without holiness is impossible, in this sense: that the heart must turn from its sins to God before it can be forgiven. Repentance is really nothing more or less than turning from sin to holiness; and who does not know that the Scriptures teach that repentance must precede pardon? Reversing this order would ruin the sinner. The idea that God can reverse it, works only ruin to those who accept it.

5. The command to be holy implies the practicability of becoming so. I meet with some professed Christians who on this subject have really no hope. They feel that need of being holy, but they are in

despair of attaining it before they die. Now these Christians claim to be believers, but they are not. The grand difficulty in their case is, that they do not believe God's word of promise. They have no faith that men can become holy in this life, yet they say they believe in Christ. Yet what is Christ if not a Savior? A Savior from what if not from sin? Is it not expressly said--"Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins"? What is Christ to do? Does he save his people in their sins? Shall he not rather save them from their sins, and "sanctify them wholly," and "redeem them unto himself as a peculiar people, zealous of good works"? Does it not seem strange that so many profess to be believers in Christ, but yet avow that they do not believe the plainest things said in the Bible of Christ? They claim to be believers! What! are they believers, gospel-believers, and yet do not believe what Christ says! Nay more, they tell you it is dangerous to believe that you can be holy in this world! Said a Unitarian minister--"How strange that the Orthodox should object to sanctification in this life"! He had been reading the views presented here, and said, "Why can they object? If they profess to believe that Jesus is a divine Savior, and that in him all fullness dwells,--why should they object? They should either give up their doctrine of a divine Savior, and deny that he is able to save to the uttermost, and abandon their ideas of a divine Redeemer, or admit your views to be true"--and certainly there seems to be force in his reasoning.

I have never been more struck with this great idea--salvation from sinning, by Jesus Christ--than I have during the past winter. I found it everywhere as I read the New Testament, and indeed in the Old Testament also. O how strange that the church should be fighting the idea of becoming holy through Jesus Christ! How strange that they should insist that he will not do such thing! Is it not wonderful?

6. Christ's promise and relations to his people imply a pledge of all the help we need. The entire gospel scheme is adapted to men--not in the sense of conniving at their weakness, but of really helping them out of it. It does not say--"Go on in your sins;" does not smooth this path by saying--"No man can live sinless in this world;" but it says--"Take hold of Christ's strength and he will help you." It does not encourage you to hold on in sinning, but it urges you to take hold of Christ for all the help you need to overcome the practical difficulties in your way. Its language is--"My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

While you affirm your moral obligation, you are more and more impressed with your moral weakness. But this weakness is what Christ counterbalances with his strength. In the extremest weakness, his strength finds largest scope and fullest development. "As thy day, so shalt thy strength be"--when thou shalt thoroughly cast thyself on the arm of the Mighty One.

Hence, the command to be holy is no apology for despondency, but should really encourage us to take hold of the strength promised to meet human weakness.

7. God sympathizes with every honest effort we make to become holy. Of course he does; how can he fail to do so? Wherever he sees a moral struggle in any soul, it interests him exceedingly. He sympathizes infinitely more deeply than we do. And yet some of us know how deeply we sympathize where we see a convert getting hold of the idea of sanctification by Christ. In some such cases I have known the joy of older Christians to be really inexpressible. When I have seen gospel ministers getting hold of the idea of sanctification and struggling to reach the experience of that idea, I have said to myself--If we can feel so deeply in view of such a struggle, how much more must God feel! Do you not think God feels? Ah, indeed in every pulse of his infinite and boundless sensibility!

8. If we become partakes of his holiness, we are made sure of the river of his pleasures. This comes both of the nature of the case and of the revealed laws of his kingdom. Holiness becomes God's house forever. And while it is fearfully true that without holiness, no man shall see the Lord, it is delightfully sure that the holy shall see and enjoy spiritual blessedness in his presence.

9. All men will sometimes feel the necessity of this holiness. In some cases, it is felt most deeply. Last winter I became acquainted with a woman, hopefully a Christian, but who had heard very little on this subject. She had been converted under circumstances where the great desolation and moral darkness became the immediate occasion of her awakening. From such surroundings, she had struggled up into the light. Yet when she came to hear the real gospel, and the way of holiness was opened to her mind, it was wonderful to see how she did grasp and devour this blessed bread of life! It met a great void in her spiritual nature, and her soul exulted in it with exceeding joy.

You often feel these struggles. You know you need something more and higher; you cannot be satisfied with your present state; you are conscious something is wrong between your soul and God, and you have a deep conviction that you need more holiness. Why then do you not lay hold of this hope set before you in the gospel?

10. There is no rest, short of being holy. Many try to find rest in something less, but they are sure to fail. They suspend further efforts and would fain believe they shall have rest where they are; but all such hope is vain. There can be no rest short of coming into sympathy with God and into spiritual union with Jesus Christ.

11. Many insanely suppose that when they come to die, they shall be sanctified and prepared for heaven. Let us sit down by the bedside of such a man--one who expects to be sanctified in death. What is he doing? What progress is he making? Would you speak kindly to him and enquire after his spiritual progress? But you must not allude to religion--the doctor would not like to have you. He says it might retard the man's recovery. He wants his mind to be perfectly quiet and unthinking. It will not do therefore even to whisper the name of Jesus! And is it supposable that this dying man is taking hold vigorously of that blessed name which you may not even whisper in his ear? Is he gaining the victory over the world by faith in the Lamb of God? Do you judge from what you see and hear that his soul is in a mighty struggle with the powers of selfishness and sin,--a struggle in which faith in Jesus ensures the victory? Ah! he sinks--he goes down, lower and lower; sometimes all consciousness seems to be lost;--and can you think that in these dying hours, his soul is entering into sympathy with Christ--is bursting away from the bands of temptation and taking hold with a mighty grasp of those exceeding great and precious promises? I do not ask you what you admit as to the possibility of miracles on a death-bed; but I ask if you think the circumstances are favorable for the mental effort which the nature of the case demands in renouncing sin and in receiving Jesus Christ by faith for sanctification?

12. No man has any right to hope unless he is really committed to holiness and in all honesty and earnestness intends to live so. If he does not intend to live a holy life, let him know that he is not in the way to heaven. If he is in his sins and indulges himself in sinning, by what right or reason can he suppose himself traveling towards the abodes of infinite purity? If he hopes for heaven at the end of such a life, he is egregiously self-deceived.

Is not every person in this house most fully convinced that he must become holy if he would be saved? Notwithstanding all the looseness of your views on this subject, do you not know that you must be holy if

you would find a home in heaven?

Do you believe that in any practical sense you really can become holy? Doubtless you do; for where would you be if you knew you must be holy and yet know equally well that you cannot be? You are not in this dilemma. You cannot bring yourself to think that the ever blessed God has ever shut up his children in a dilemma so hopeless.

The case with you probably is, that you know you ought to become holy, but you are not ready to be just now. If I should call on the younger classes, they would say--I have so much to do, how can I? Certainly I am not ready now. The middle-aged also are equally unprepared yet. The great evil is that men will not act on their own convictions. They have convictions; they know what they ought to do and that it is infinitely wicked for them not to do, yet they do it not. There they stop. They stop, not in the point of gospel rest, but in the point where impenitent sinners often stop--convicted of sin, but not acting up to their convictions of duty. Suppose one should come to you and try to hire you to make no further effort to become more holy; could you be hired to any such committal? It would affect you very much as it would have done when you were first convicted of sin, if some one had tried to hire you to defer all effort to come to Christ for a score of years longer. You would have cried out--"Get thee behind me, Satan,"--"don't tempt me to sell my soul!" Satan took a more cunning course. He only said--Waive it just now; let it lie over till you find a convenient season. So offered, the bait took, and you swallowed it; and so thousands are putting off their effort to become holy. You would be horror-stricken with the proposal to put off all effort to become holy for ten years longer; but the thought of putting it over for an indefinite time--supposed to be not very long, does not startle you at all.

O my hearers, what shall the end be of such procrastination? May it not be that in your real heart you have no love of holiness, and have never sought it as the pearl of great price? Can it be well for you to go on still in a course that leads you farther every day from God? Will you forget that he is holy, and that if you would behold his face in peace, you too must become holy?

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