

On Being Searched of God

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being searched by God, a process of self-examination and repentance that leads to spiritual growth and renewal.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23

Topics: "Self-Examination", "Divine Searching"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of inviting God to search our hearts, especially during times of spiritual darkness, insensibility, or guilt. He outlines various conditions under which this prayer is particularly relevant, such as feeling distant from God or lacking the spirit of prayer. Finney warns against self-deception and the dangers of justifying one's actions through false standards, urging believers to seek divine illumination to uncover hidden sins. He concludes by encouraging persistent prayer and self-examination, reminding the congregation that true spiritual awakening requires a willingness to confront and confess one's shortcomings.

Transcript

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."--Psalm 139:23, 24.

These words occur at the close of that wonderful Psalm, written under a vivid sense of God's omniscience and omnipresence, and which begins--"O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me."

In treating my text, I propose,

I. To show when this prayer, always appropriate, is especially and peculiarly so.

1. When persons are in spiritual darkness, and have low and faint conceptions of spiritual things. Then they have great reason to suspect that something is wrong, and should be searched out that it may be set right. It must be that something separates between your soul and God, and you should set yourself to urge this prayer unceasingly.

2. In a state of spiritual insensibility let men cry to God in like manner to be searched. When you do not feel the power of truth, you may be assured something is wrong, and you certainly should not rest till it be searched out. Those who suffer themselves to remain in such a state, without enquiry for the cause, wrong their own souls.

3. When the mind is oppressed with a sense of guilt, but does not clearly see where the guilt lies, no one should remain at ease at all till the whole matter is searched to the bottom. Often persons carry a sense of guilt in their souls a long time, yet do not see the particular cause. Probably they will not see it, unless the Spirit of God search them thoroughly. Hence, they should cry mightily unto him for his searching power.

4. When in attempting to approach God, you find access denied you. You try to pray, but find no access to God. Your prayer seems to be shut off; it falls, but never rises toward God. Then you should enquire why your Father's door is shut against you, and why, when you try to come to a throne of grace you can get no access to it. Then ask God to search you.

Again, when you have no spirit of prayer. When you have no inclination to go to God; when you know you need blessings, but do not feel inclined to go to God and seek them in earnest prayer;--then cry to God for the searching grace of his Spirit.

When prayer, instead of being spontaneous, costs you effort, and it seems a hard labor to bring your mind to prayer,--then you should know that your heart does not pray--it is only your lips that pray at best;--and, alarmed at such a state of things, you should fall back upon this preliminary prayer, and earnestly implore grace from God to search you and bring to your own view all the fearful wrong of your heart or life.

Some of you may be in this state; will you ask yourself how this is, and what the reason of it can be?

Equally so, if your prayers do not prevail with God. Then you should by all means enquire what can hinder your prayers before God. You may safely assume that there is something wrong in yourself; nothing wrong in God, nor has he even forgotten his promises.

Again, when you are not successful in your efforts to do good; when God does not animate your efforts and crown them with his blessing;--then let not your soul rest, but arise and cry mightily to God that you may know wherefore his grace is withheld from your endeavors.

Again, when the Bible and religious truth in general, and gospel means, are not enjoyed; when you can neglect the Bible and not find it precious to your soul; and your soul is not deeply in earnest;--then something is in the way; the Spirit of God is grieved, and you should awake to a most earnest search for this cause. This is an unnatural state of things for a Christian.

Indeed, whenever you are not filled with the Spirit, you should enquire why not? There is surely some valid reason why you are not, and it behooves you to search for that reason.

When the medium between our souls and God is not clear; when, instead of standing in his sunlight, there is plainly some thick cloud between God and your soul, and you cannot commune freely with him, then you need to be alive to your danger. If you are weak in faith, and your heart does not take hold of the great things of God and of salvation with earnest power, then something is wrong, and you should by no means suffer it to remain unsearched and still undermining your spiritual life.

II. Why do men need divine searching?

Many have supposed that they need the Spirit, not because they are not well disposed, but because there is some defect beyond and beneath their own activities and which therefore they cannot reach, and none but God can. Their need of divine aid is of such a nature that they can excuse themselves if they do not have it. Now in fact, if Christians examine themselves they will see that the very reason they need it lies

wholly in themselves. This will appear, as I proceed to show what these reasons are.

1. The influence of prejudice. Men take up a one-sided view of the case, and they do even this under the influence of a dishonest prejudice, for if they were thoroughly honest, they would be careful about forming opinions, and would more often avoid serious mistakes. We are prone, under temptations, to adopt opinions with only a partial and one-sided view of the case, and yet may not be aware of the fact. The mind acts under its present views, but the reason why these views and no others are present, is due to prejudice. The mind is not in a state thoroughly honest. So opinions are formed of persons, under prejudice. Those who form them do not know better, but they ought to know better. In such cases men should pray earnestly that God would reveal to them their prejudices, and they should cast themselves on God for his aid.

Again, men need the Spirit because they are prone to justify themselves on a false standard. Not having before their minds the love required in both the law and the gospel, they judge themselves, not by God's rule, but by some other rule. Whereas, if they would bring themselves under the light of the golden rule and require of themselves the same love every where in all relations, which they bear towards wives and children, brothers and sisters, they would soon see their mistake.

But men are not wont to use this golden rule in honest application. When you see a difficulty spring up between two men, each wrong, perhaps, yet each justifying himself, you will find they have a false standard of judgment. If you bring their conduct to the standard of gospel love, you will readily see that all is wrong.

I have been often shocked at my own mistakes in judging myself from a false point of view, neglecting and forgetting Christ's spirit, in which he could even die for an enemy. Instead of looking at it in that light, I found myself inclined to take quite another view, and therein, I learned my great need of the Holy Spirit.

Again, we are often blinded by our feelings. These have a wonderful influence on our opinions. Feelings control the intellect, and this acts towards the control of the will. Hence, we fall into errors because we are blinded by excited feelings.

Persons sometimes say--We have been so tried and abused, we have good reason for feeling excited. Yet, after all, they cannot be satisfied in a course which conscience condemns. Yet they manage to keep themselves blind, while really their excuse is no excuse at all. It avails nothing that men try to justify themselves in wrong-doing because others have done wrong first, arguing that we may rightly injure those who have injured us. Such a state of self-justification needs to be thoroughly searched out by the Spirit of God.

One peculiarity is often overlooked. It often happens that persons, when themselves the subject of abuse, bear it firmly, being on their guard; but when another is abused, then they think it noble to resist and repel the wrong, and often go into this with a spirit which they would at once condemn if it were aimed to repel a wrong done themselves. The devil gets great advantage over them. They think they are standing up in defense of truth and right; but do it with a spirit altogether wrong. Many a man has pled for the slave in a spirit that shuts him off from God. Seeing despotism lording it over his fellow-man, he lets his indignation loose, and steps into the place of him who has said--"Vengeance is mine." God wants no such advocacy of even the oppressed. Let no man assume that God neglects his duty of avenging the wrongs of earth!

Often in this way men are led stealthily into a wrong spirit. They find themselves shut out from God and begin to enquire for the reason. They say--In such a case, I recollect I became greatly excited, but I had good reason, for that poor man was shamefully abused. Take care; you must not become uncharitable and grieve the heart of God!

We often need God's searching Spirit because we forget. We cultivate the habit of forgetting what we do not wish to remember. Under some influence, leading in that direction, we do not care to remember. God says, "They do not consider that I remember all their sins." Hence, it behooves you to cry--"O Lord, what is it?" We need some special providence, or some form of divine utterance, that shall wake us up to the remembrance of our deeds.

Men often shield themselves under some false principle, or some supposed fact, wither of which they admit to be true without sufficient care. Having once adopted the principle or the fact, the mind becomes incapable of seeing things as they are. This incapability is a great sin, because of the influence which the will has had in producing it. Thus blinded, men pass on till they plunge into an ocean of errors, all growing out of their self-will.

Often men are blinded by self-esteem. They have a much better opinion of themselves than they ought to have. Hence, they under-estimate their wrong deeds and over-estimate their right ones. By this means they must, of course, fall into darkness. Indeed, the spirit of egotism amounts sometimes to a sort of insanity. There is a species of egotistical insanity, in which the mind forever recurs to itself, and never sees anything pertaining to self in a just light. Let me not be understood to imply that this insanity is a misfortune and not a crime, for it certainly is a great crime, growing out of a culpable and sinfully indulged self-esteem. This egotism is one of the most difficult things to root out from the mind. There is little hope for him unless God interposes to open his eyes and reveal his own heart to himself in its just light.

Persons are often blinded by self-interest. You are aware that courts of law will not allow a man to be either witness or juror, if he has any self-interest in the case. A judge will not even allow himself to sit and hear a case as judge if he has any personal interest in it. I knew the case of a man who had been consulted as a lawyer upon a case, and gave his opinion upon it, and subsequently coming upon the bench, the same case was brought before him in the court of appeals, and he refused to hear it, on the ground that he might be biased by his previously formed and expressed opinion. Persons often overlook this danger and get deeply involved in some sin and allow themselves to justify their own course, under the obvious influence of self-interest. In such a case, how earnestly should men cry out to God--"O my God, open my heart, and let thy light in! Draw me out lest I die in my sin!"

Again, we often need God's light because we are blinded by the fear or the love of man. The fear or the love of the creature more than the Creator leads us astray. I think I could name ministers who have lost their power with God and with man, by means of being led astray by the fear or the love of some of their congregation. Their prayers are cold as death, and their position on great moral questions plainly shows that they do not stand in God's counsels.

Again, men often fall into the habit of professing more in their prayers and otherwise, than is strictly true. Sometimes they remain professors of religion, when they knew they ought not to, for they have no heart in it. They may excuse themselves by pleading that they are about as good as their neighbors are, yet they know this excuse can avail nothing before God. Such persons must fall into great darkness. O how many ministers have continued on in all the forms of religion with hearts hard as a stone, their very professions

altogether hypocrisy and deceit before God!

In this spirit men sometimes fill the office of deacon, holding it solemnly before God and the church, yet with none of the spirit of a true deacon. Some men hold on in this way after year, and completely destroy their own souls. Sanctimonious in their professions, selfish, fast asleep, they never find that when they open their mouths there is a bursting out of feeling from the living fire in their souls. Cold, formal, speculative, dead, the heart with no mellowness--how plainly such persons ought to cry out to God, "O my Strength, cast me not off; there must be something wrong in me; O tell me what it is! Search me till all is revealed."

Again, we need divine searching because we are so prone to attend to others' sins more than our own. We are in great danger of this, especially if we feel annoyed by others' sins, and get into a bad state of mind ourselves. Indeed, we are in the more danger precisely as we get farther away from God. Often this becomes a habit, insomuch that persons hear preaching in this way, neglecting entirely to take the part which belongs to themselves, and never allowing the truth to come close home to their hearts. Now unless God comes down to search such persons, they will never return to life and love again.

Men are exceedingly apt to rest in the letter without the spirit, satisfied with holding the truth without obeying it. The Jews of old stumbled on this rock. Such people are not aware of their danger, for those truths which they hold may be truly valuable, yet if this truth does not affect and even arouse them, it is all bad.

Men need God's searching Spirit because they are so liable to sear conscience if it be abused. They see nothing on the field of consciousness, and therefore, think all must be right. Surely they will go to destruction unless God arouse them and search them thoroughly! By conscience, such persons understand a feeling of remorse; and hence, not feeling this, they think all is well. It is not strange, therefore, that they should live in a great sin a long time, and yet not see their real condition. Yet, none the less for their blindness do they lose their communion with God. There is little hope in their case unless they arouse themselves to cry mightily unto God for his searching Spirit.

Men are apt to overlook the sin of unbelief, perhaps confounding it with disbelief; and hence, not being conscious of denying the truth in disbelief, they assume that they are not guilty of resisting its power in unbelief. Really, they do not give God credit for veracity, and much less still do they earnestly trust him according to all their wants and to his grace to supply them. Only by God's searching Spirit are they likely to be recovered from this snare.

Often men mistake the will for the conscience. They think their conscience is clear and right, when, in fact, in their case, conscience is seared and the will is up in its strength, and has assumed more than all the functions of conscience. If their conscience were in a healthy state, they would readily distinguish between the two; but now, having only a will in action, they must have their eyes thoroughly opened by the divine Spirit, or they will not discriminate between the will and the conscience.

Or, persons confound memory with imagination. Having passed through a course of doubtful conduct, they conceive what would excuse them, and then bring themselves to think it was so. The circumstances are suggested by the imagination, and are then supposed to be held as by simply memory. Such persons are very probably not aware of this deception, but go on, sinning and covering up their sin as they go. Unless God convince them of their sins, they wax worse and worse; get fearfully far away from God, even while assuming that all is right; while plainly, if they were to apply honestly even the simplest tests of

Christian experience, they would find the bottom of their piety altogether fallen out.

Men are prone to take credit for what is of little or no real value. Often they do things only in the letter, without a particle of the spirit which God requires, and which only could make the outward doing, real obedience. Thus, men will attend religious meetings--right in the letter,--but with no heart of worship, and no regard to pleasing God--and hence, all is wanting in the spirit of the deed. Or, they give their money for a benevolent object, yet give it most grudgingly or selfishly, and therefore, in a spirit which God abhors. Now, if men take credit to themselves for such services, they are under a most radical mistake, and need God's Spirit to open their eyes to see it.

Often men overlook a multitude of dishonesties and hypocrisies. They go on in a course of professions towards God which, being empty, are unutterably loathsome to him. Who can save them from this delusion, but God himself!

Men are apt to resist and grieve away the Spirit without remembering when and how they did it. They were walking with God, up to a certain point;--then they parted from him, but they did not at once notice the fact and do not subsequently recall the circumstances so as to see the reason why God there left them. The truth, doubtless, was, that the Spirit urged some point of duty, but they resisted. So they lost their life and peace, and passed on, so much interested in something else that they failed to notice that God had departed from them. In such a state man's only help is to cry to God for his searching Spirit.

We are apt to fail in fulfilling the conditions of prayer, and hence begin to doubt and become greatly discouraged. Parents praying for children fail to fulfill the conditions, and hence make no real use of the promises. Such persons greatly need God's searching Spirit to show them their own case.

Some men are at issue with God by reason of making excuses for their sins. How many have been in a terrible state of commotion, agonized, distressed, anxious to know wherefore it is thus with them, when really the fact is they are excusing some sin.

Men sometimes suppose themselves fully consecrated to God when they are not so. Some little idols are hid among the stuff, as in the case of Rachel. No matter how small--a finger ring, or a pin, if reserved as our own, and not heartily laid on God's altar, it mars your consecration to God. You are not a fruitful branch, but only a dry stalk. You can have no hold on God in prayer. In real consecration, the heart is full of God, and this full heart breaks forth in appropriate emotions and reveals itself in a rich spiritual life. If your case lack these evidences, you need to enquire, Lord, is this all? Is Christianity a powerless religion? You need to cry out--Tell me, O my Father am I really consecrated to Thee, or am I deceived?

Men are in great danger in the line of covering up sin, or refusing when convicted, to confess it. These causes involve them in great spiritual darkness.

Sometimes persons harbor resentment without being aware of it. They would not exactly like to inflict evil on another, but are more than willing it should befall him, no matter who does it. There is really an ill feeling. In this state of mind, you find yourself shut out from God and need to cry out for light.

III. I must next speak of the manner in which God answers prayer to be searched.

1. By directly calling our attention to the thing we need to see. He may do this by the direct agency of his Spirit, bringing up some truth of his word with amazing power and applying it in a most searching manner to our hearts. It is not so much the Bible, as the Spirit of God in the Bible, and by means of the Bible, that

brings such light.

A lady, having made a profession of religion and entered upon a Christian life, subsequently found herself so greatly tried, that she at length said, "I must give up all profession of piety and all attempt to live a Christian life unless I can succeed better.["] At that time she had not been taught that she might find deliverance through Christ. But at this juncture, the doctrine of sanctification was brought before her mind, and she felt her need of its provisions. She embraced it in theory, hoping, and for the time assuming, that this would bring her the desired relief. But this failed, and she was about to abandon the theory, when it was suggested that she had not faithfully put the doctrine in practice. One of her most besetting and powerful sins was in her temper. She began to see that she must have grace for a victory over this. Just at this crisis, her husband in family worship read the passage--"In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (Jn. 16:38) It thrilled her very soul. She cried out --"My temper is dead; through grace I have conquered, and my victory is complete." Many years afterwards, she said of herself--"Never since that hour have I felt any risings of unhallowed temper, and I no more expect to give way to that sin than I expect to cut my neighbor's throat."

Often God brings about the same result by the aid of his providences,--these acting from without, and his Spirit, within. Together they reveal to the mind what was not seen before. One man meets with losses of property, and the loss shows him that this property was held as his, not as God's.

Only last winter, a lady told me she had fallen into a dreadful state of mind, bordering on despair, so that her friends even feared that she would kill herself. At length, providence showed her what the matter was. Her husband had refused to perform the duty of family worship, and she got angry about it. She was so full of zeal for God, as she thought, that she was not aware of her great sin. At length, God brought help by converting her husband. Then, seeing that she was parted from him, and that she had been sinfully angry, her heart was broken down into penitence, and her soul restored to the joys of God's salvation.

In conclusion, let me say--

Having made this prayer, be careful not to resist the divine searching. Whatever means God may use, let him go on, unresisted on your part. When we most need to be searched, we are in greatest danger of resisting the process.

Having begun, be careful not to desist from praying and self-searching till the work has gone to the bottom. Cease not, till you find your soul filled with peace and power, such as will reveal itself everywhere.

As fast as God reveals light, we should use it. Many begin well and pray well, but defer repentance and reform till they shall have seen the whole. They want everything revealed before they begin to repent and reform. Or they look for the blessing before they have fulfilled all the conditions. They say--"Give me the blessing, and then I will repent." This is no way to deal with God. Let them rather deal honestly and put away all iniquity as fast as they discover it.

When persons pray that God would search them, they should use all fit means to search themselves. Not to do this shows that you are not really honest in desiring the blessing.

Some of you have lived here many years, and passed through many scenes of refreshing, and many agencies of both providence and grace, designed for your good, but now seem to have thrown off a sense of responsibility and to have wandered far from God. How greatly do you need to open your hearts before

God and expose all to the light of his face and truth. It would be wonderful if amid so many excitements, some should not be very far out of the way. I am sure something must be wrong here. We need a general awakening of mind, in which each one shall fix his mind on his own sins. After such a sermon as this, some one will say--"That is the preaching we need; do not you think the church needs such preaching?" And yet this very man who cares so benevolently for the church, needs the sermon more than any other man in town. The thing most of all needed is, that each man should apply it to himself--asking--In what respect do I need this sermon? For what do I need to be searched, and to pray that God would search me and try me, and see if there be any evil way in me? Some of you, I am afraid, are in most perishing need of this personal treatment. Brethren, when shall this church be as holy as it professes to be; as it is supposed to be; and as its theory leads people to assume that it is? When shall all our theories be reduced to practice?

It often happens that people most in the fog about their own state are most tried with the bad state of others. This is sometimes a great and sore delusion! Beware of it.

How many of you are in the habit of taking your spiritual reckoning every week, or even every month, to see where you are, and whether you may not be coasting along a lee shore, just on the rocks--heading towards them under wind and tide--the breakers roaring under your bow! Pray that God may search you all out, and leave nothing undisclosed! Pray that God may search all this people, each according to his need. This, more than anything else, is what the impenitent here need to see in every house and in every Christian--each one an epistle of Jesus Christ, known and read of all. So would the gospel be honored, and its truth be enforced with resistless power.

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