

On Confessing and Being Cleansed From Sin

by Charles Finney

True confession of sin implies understanding, ceasing from sin, recognition of guilt, and recognition of moral weakness as our own fault, and leads to faithfulness and justice of God in forgiving sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness.

Scripture: Psalm 51:10, Proverbs 28:13, Matthew 11:28, James 5:16, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Confession", "Forgiveness"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of genuine confession of sins as a prerequisite for receiving God's forgiveness and cleansing. He explains that true confession goes beyond mere words; it requires a heartfelt acknowledgment of one's sins and a commitment to renounce them. Finney warns against the self-deception of claiming to be without sin and highlights the importance of recognizing our moral weaknesses as our own responsibility. He assures that God is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse those who sincerely confess their sins, offering hope for transformation through Christ's power. Ultimately, Finney calls for a deep, honest engagement with our sins to experience the fullness of God's grace.

Transcript

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9

The connection in which this passage stands, is this--"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

The first inquiry under our text is,--

What is implied in "confessing our sins?"

Of course, it must mean something more than merely verbal confession. For,

"God abhors the sacrifice,

where not the heart is found."

A merely lip confession can be no other than an abomination to God.

It is plain that some do not confess to purpose, for they are not thereby cleansed from their sin. Their own life shows that they have not secured the fulfillment of this promise, and, therefore, we know they have not performed its condition.

Confession implies that we understand what our sin consists in. It is one of the most remarkable things in the history of human nature, that men can sit under the sound of the gospel, and yet never seem to understand what their sin consists in--that it consists in refusing to do our duty to God.

Suppose one of these merchants here holds a claim against a man. He has often asked him to pay it. The man confesses the duty in words, but always denies it in practice. What will this merchant think of his customer? Is it not strange that this customer of his can pretend not to see wherein his own sin consists? This is sin. As Pollok says of the man wailing in eternal despair--he hears ever and anon a voice as if it came down from the Light above--"Ye knew your duty, but ye did it not."

So sin consists in a known and voluntary neglect to know and obey God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Again, true confession implies that we cease from all known sin, of either omission, or commission. Also, that we cease from all excuses or apologies for sin. He who makes an honest confession does it under the heart-conviction that all sin is utterly wrong. Feeling this, he cannot say one word in excuse or apology for sinning.

It also recognizes our guilt, and not only for all want of outward conformity to God's law, but for all inward sin--for all sins of the heart. The confession contemplates sin as against God, and, therefore, it makes no discrimination in favor of those that escape the human eye.

Again, to confess our sin rightly, recognizes this fact--that, so far as we are not perfect before God, the fault is our own. Of course, this imports that God requires of us perfection, and has proffered us such aid, that this command is in no sense unreasonable.

It implies, also, that we recognize our moral weakness as really our sin. Many people do not go so deep as this. Really, they assume that some how or other, this moral weakness is their misfortune, and not their great sin. They ascribe it to Adam, and not to themselves. Few men will march straight up to the idea that they are to blame for their spiritual weakness. They try to get around it. But all real and right confession implies that we admit this sin to be our own, and not Adam's. It leaves to Adam to bear his own sin, but does not try to shirk its own blameworthiness, by passing it over upon the father of the race.

Notice how the Bible speaks of this moral weakness. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" This is, indeed, a very strong representation of the moral weakness of our race; but what does it say? Does Jeremiah here drop a hint that this weakness comes from Adam, and that, considered as a sin, it is to be accounted as only Adam's? Hear what he says--"Then shall they who are accustomed to do evil, learn to do well." The difficulty is, he began wrong and has kept on wrong. By his own acts, this course of wrong-doing has become confirmed. And is not this his own fault? To be sure it is. He has not only tied his own hands himself, but he has kept them tied of his own free will.

A proper confession of sin implies, therefore, that we recognize the great extent of our moral debility, and feel that it is our own fault. The question is not precisely whether, at the point of final struggle, we can

withstand the influence of motives, temptations; but whether we cannot--at a point further back--control the state of mind which gives motives to sin their great power. What does the wife complain of in her drunken husband? Not merely that, in the final conflict, he yields to temptation and is overcome; but she complains of that state of mind in which he refuses to become temperate, and in which--in the cool hour when no temptation is upon him, he gives himself up to strong drink, and will not try to deliver himself from his powerful foe.

So of all sinners. God says of them--"They will not frame their doings to return to the Lord their God, because the spirit of whoredoms is in the midst of them, and they have not known the Lord."

The great difficulty with sinners lies in their self-justifying spirit. They will not confess their sins. They have never in heart given up their sins, and thrown themselves in desperation on that strong Arm that is able to save them to the uttermost.

Nothing is plainer than this--that, if sinners would be saved, they must renounce all their sins--must go to the bottom, and make a clean breast before the Lord, and before men too, so far forth as their sin affects their fellow-men.

Many are so taken up with the sins of others, they have no time to think of confessing their own. But, confessing to purpose implies that you really renounce your own sin, wholly, and confess it to all who have a personal interest or concern in it.

Let us next consider what the text affirms upon the condition of true confession. This is it: "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This may be regarded as a promise; but it really is an explicit assertion. Let us see what it affirms.

"He is faithful" to forgive us our sins--implies that he has promised, and will surely perform. His word is pledged, and he cannot fail to perform it.--And is also "just to forgive"--implying that performance is now a matter of justice in the sense of veracity--fidelity in the performance of what he has promised. He adds--and "to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This is just what we want.

Our great unrighteousness is our ruin. The absence of righteousness is essentially the same as the moral weakness of the soul. This moral weakness is so great, that, without God's gracious aid, no one will ever repent. You know how men sometimes fall under the dominion of some strong appetite, like that for alcohol, or opium, or tobacco, and become so fearfully enslaved and subjected to this appetite, that their utmost efforts to free themselves seem only like the struggles of an infant against some gigantic power. Many such cases you have seen--illustrative of the very nature of all sin. Now the glorious grace of God which cleanseth from all unrighteousness and from all want of conformity to God's will, is the very thing we need.

How many of you have felt this difficulty. You have practically so little power to stand before temptation that you find yourselves almost perpetually overcome. If tempted to anger, you give way before the temptation. Or if tempted to peevishness, or to lust, you are easily overcome. This experience of moral weakness is but too painfully familiar to your whole history. You, then, ought to understand and appreciate the blessedness of a gospel which cleanseth from all unrighteousness.

Perhaps most of you cannot remember when you first repelled the monitions of conscience. Somewhere far back, in the memory of your moral existence, when your mother admonished you of duty, or your

Sabbath school teacher gave you some instruction as to your duty to God, or to man, you felt some impressions of duty, and some monitions of conscience, but you did not yield to their demands. Ah, that was a momentous hour! How fearful the mischief which you did to your own moral nature by that first distinct resistance to the conviction of duty! Then you entered on a career of sin and hardness of heart, which has naturally led you on from bad to worse ever since. It may be that some of you are so hardened that you can go on shamelessly in sin, and care no more for the monitions of conscience than you do for the idle wind. Is not this a fearful state?

Those of you who have never submitted your will to God's will must say, if you were to speak the whole truth--"When I see my duty, I do not perform it; I cannot tell why not; I can give no account, but I know I always fail; and however it is to be accounted for, such is the fact." True, this is the real fact, whether you frankly confess it, or whether you conceal and evade it.

Those of you who attempt to begin to turn to the Lord find yourselves amazingly weak. The iron habits of years are not broken up without a fearful struggle.

Do you not say, when you speak out what you feel--"I have no tendencies towards God; all my tendencies are towards sinning." You have observed this. Most of you have felt it. You have often dwelt on your case in precisely this strain of thought;--saying, "I am dead in sin; whatever may be the reason of it, I am not prepared for heaven, and I dare not go to hell, for the spirit of obedience to God is not in me." Such is your deplorable case.

Ye who have submitted to God feel the need of salvation deep and thorough. Sometimes, your experience compels you to exclaim,--"I need a salvation omnipotent in its moral force; else I cannot stand." All this decay of moral vigor--this collapse in the moral system--this is what you need to overcome, and grace for this result is precisely the thing your case requires. You try to pray, but heart and language fail you! Ah, this sinking away from God--this perpetual gravitation earthward and sinward--how terrible! You must be delivered from this; and nothing else can deliver you short of this moral cleansing which is provided in the blessed gospel.

The thing you need is that the Holy Spirit should become a moral power in your soul, antagonistic to the moral forces there that urge you towards sinning. This is the antidote of God's own providing.

This death in sin is complete. Unless there be some supernatural power to counteract it, all your efforts will be vain--vain essentially for the reason that you are not disposed to make efforts to any practical purpose. When you receive this divine power to help, you will understand what this means--"I am the resurrection and the life." To have this resurrection-power and life of Christ in you working in you to do all his will--this is the cleansing which the gospel promises, and which you so greatly need. When you experience it, you will find it a most effectual influence. Then you will know how blessed it is to have a supernatural and ever-present power at hand on which you may perpetually lean. Unless this power takes possession of the soul, nothing effectual will be done. How often does it happen that "the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not." Do you understand this?

REMARKS.

1. We have before us now precisely the true mission of Christ. The text speaks particularly of Jesus Christ, inasmuch as it is said that "his blood cleanseth us from all sin." The entire work he does for us is composed of two parts; forgiveness and moral cleansing. Through his blood shed for us, he can forgive;

through his Spirit, sent down to dwell in our souls, he can cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The atonement is one part of this great work, naturally first in order. This is finished. This work is wrought out and complete, and needs not to be done again. And Jesus has risen from the grave and ascended on high to great power and glory that he may accomplish the remaining part of this work--sending his Spirit down to convince of sin and to cleanse the soul from its pollutions.

2. If Christ be really divine, then he is doubtless able to do this work in both of its great departments. Being truly divine, his death, we readily see, must make an ample atonement; and it is equally clear, that if he be truly divine, there can be no limit to his power to save the soul from sin. But if he is nothing but a man, then this claim to be able to save to the uttermost, it is all nonsense! Nothing can be so absurd! What a blasphemer he is! But if he be truly divine, then this is just what may be expected of him. A leading Unitarian of New England, on learning our views of sanctification, and being informed of the objections raised against these views in many quarters, said--"What is the ground of these objections, raised by those who are called Orthodox, against your views of sanctification? If the orthodox views of Christ are correct, and he is truly divine, then this result, as held by Oberlin men, is just what ought to be expected. A Savior really divine ought to be able not only to pardon but to cleanse from sin. If he were human only, then it might ever remain true that "[]no mere man, either of himself, or by any grace received in this life, can wholly keep the commandments of God, but must daily break them in thought, word, and deed.[]" Every thing seems to turn on the question of his true divinity. And I marvel how men who hold to this divinity, can yet object against his having such power to save."

3. The gross inconsistency of holding Christ's divinity and rejecting his ability or his willingness to save, is the great stumblingblock of the world. It is the more glaring because the scriptures announce his mission in precisely this language--"Thou shalt call his name Jesus (Savior) for he shall save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:22

4. The self-excusing spirit is the ruin of the race. It begins by throwing back the guilt of all human transgressions upon Adam. What monstrous wickedness! It can be shown that this moral weakness can be only voluntary, and can lie nowhere save in man's moral nature--in that nature where everything is free and voluntary.

Take the case of a drunkard, and admit, if you please, that he commenced moral agency with a strong bias in his constitution towards strong drink. But this bias is not his sin--is not in itself sin at all. It may become an occasion of sinning, but it is not itself sin. If he resists firmly, he is the more virtuous for that constitutional tendency, and can by no means be deemed the more sinful. Thus there are some young men who resist all the temptations incident to city life, and who may be trusted even in a bank, or anywhere else. The more temptation they withstand, the greater their virtue. It may be true of some of you that you have inherited tendencies to temptation: but this is not sin. It may occasion temptation; but it does not necessitate sin. Take the case of Paul's thorn in the flesh. This was manifestly in some form a temptation and an occasion to sin. No matter what it was; we know not and cannot know what it was; but it did not result in moral weakness--did not paralyze his moral strength; but rather made him strong, because it emptied him of himself and cast him wholly on Christ for strength.

5. Many overlook the real nature of their sin, do not see wherein it lies, and hence have never confessed it. Often like a man enslaved to opium or tobacco, they will not see that this very enslavement is their sin, and therefore they do not confess and find mercy.

You may see also why the church is not sanctified. Many in the church have never yielded the great controversy with God--have never taken sides with God against themselves and against all their own sin. Many years ago in preaching to an Old School church and congregation on "making to themselves a new heart," I showed them that the sinner first made his own heart wicked, then kept it wicked, and therefore was under perpetual and growing obligation to make to himself a new heart. This threw them into great agitation. They had heard ever so much about inability, dependence, the work of the Spirit, &c., &c., but had never heard this truth. Consequently, they came into great excitement. While I was yet preaching, many rose to their feet, startled by such things as God helped me to say. The minister who sat in the desk behind me, kept moving from one end of the seat to the other in the greatest excitement; you might hear him breathe hard under so much intense emotion. It was not that he dissented from the doctrine preached, but he felt so intensely anxious for the effect it might have on the people. As we came down and walked along through the aisles, one woman cried out to the minister--What do you think of that? "Worth five hundred dollars," said he. "Then you have never preached the gospel to us," said she, to which he replied, "Very true, I have not."

To another woman there who found fault with this doctrine, I said--"You would make it out that God ought to provide an atonement as a thing of simple justice, and ought to give to men the Holy Ghost, and that no man has done wrong by sinning against God." True, said she, I have always thought that God ought to help sinners since they cannot help themselves.

Thus it is that men who lay their sin on Adam and not on themselves, and on God but not on themselves, never confess to any purpose. Their pretended confession is no confession at all. They deny the very foundation of the gospel.

6. You, sinners here, perhaps do not think you are so wicked, as you are told you are here. You try to think that this great sin of yours is not your fault. Hence you do not confess and you get no peace.

Many of you have held the truth in theory, but you reject it in practice. Have you not seen your own sin so clearly that it seemed to you utterly loathsome, and you could spew it out of your mouth--even as a drunkard abhors himself and knows that this horrible weakness which lets him sink down into sottishness, is the very thing he ought to confess as his sin and shame, and ought to abhor?

7. True Christians do find a power not their own, really cleansing, sustaining, and making them clean. This is indeed a rich and blessed experience.

Ye who are conscious of not being cleansed, do ye not feel your need of a power not your own? You find yourself exceedingly weak and easily overcome. Do you not need a far different experience? There is a far higher life than this you are living. To illustrate this truth, let me refer to a lady in Rochester who has for many years known much of the indwelling power of Christ. Two years since she suffered a great physical affliction which subjected her to severe bodily suffering, so great and so fearful that one could not bear to look at her in her extreme paroxysms of pain. Yet under this extremest suffering, she was so blessed and so happy, she often said she would not have one feature in her case otherwise than God should order it in one single point. Afterward however, she thought she fell into sin. Consequently she became fearfully dejected, and often said--"Can I ever be forgiven?"

I saw her while in this state of mind and said to her--"Are you aware that your very question implies the greatest unkindness towards your Savior? Suppose it lay between you and your husband. Suppose you have in one case spoken unkindly of him; and now you feel this very questioning as to him. You cannot

see how he can ever forgive you. How would this affect his feelings? What would he say? How would he grieve over this unbelief of his wife!["] She had not seen how this doubting had wronged Christ. It had not occurred to her that this was really "the unkindest cut of all." She did not see it till it was mentioned; then she saw that the greatest sin she had to confess was this very sin of doubting Christ's love and his readiness to forgive.

Is not here a fountain opened? Are not its waters just such as you perpetually need? Suppose there were somewhere an artesian well, out of which gushed up a constant and mighty stream; and suppose further that it is found to have a power to cleanse from all sin. Absolutely, whoever comes and drinks of this water is cleansed from his iniquities. How far would you go to reach this well and to drink from these waters? You, brother, and you, sister, how far would you go for these waters? Do you not say--If I knew they actually had this healing virtue, and would make everyone strong as with Christ's own power, how readily would I go to Asia, or to the ends of the earth! "Ah, said a young man, I was straining to reach this water; I had been struggling and pressing to get to it--and lo, in a moment, I opened my eyes and it is here--at my feet; I am standing in it and it flows like a river all around about me." So, many see the gospel when their spiritual eye is opened.

The thing you need is to confess and renounce your sin, and then come to Christ and cast yourself on him for life.

Sinner, is there not hope for you in Jesus? Will you really come to him? See here is your help. Not in Asia, nor in Africa; not in some unknown land; but here, in Christ who is here to save. "The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart--the word of faith which we preach."

Some of you have feared that if you became Christians, you could not stand. Never fear, but come, and cast yourself on Jesus and trust him to cleanse you from all unrighteousness.

O this glorious idea--being cleansed from all unrighteousness--putting from us all this moral weakness which has crippled us so long!

Brethren, what is the reason we should not right here do this very thing? Why not come out at once and freely say--I do confess; I abhor myself for my sins; I have been long time in bondage; but here the rock is smitten, and while the waters of salvation flow, let me at least step in and be healed!

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