

On Following Christ

by Charles Finney

Following Christ is our duty and requires obedience to his will, confidence in him, and a willingness to be saved by him.

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:62, John 21:22, Hebrews 12:1

Topics: "Obedience to God", "Following Christ"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the call of Jesus to follow Him, as illustrated in John 21:22, where Jesus instructs Peter to focus on his own path rather than concern himself with others. Finney highlights the importance of immediate obedience to Christ's command, urging believers to resist the temptation to compare their journey with others and to commit fully to following Jesus. He stresses that following Christ involves a personal decision to trust Him, obey His will, and prioritize spiritual duties over worldly concerns. The sermon encourages listeners to recognize their responsibility to follow Christ for their own spiritual well-being and the influence they can have on others. Ultimately, Finney calls for a decisive commitment to follow Jesus, regardless of the sacrifices it may entail.

Transcript

"Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me." John 21:22

These words Christ spake to Peter. He had previously given Peter to understand that in his advanced life his liberty would be restrained, and that he would have the honor of glorifying God by a martyr's death. A question arose in Peter's mind--more curious than wise--how it would fare with his fellow disciple, John. So he enquires--"Lord, what shall this man do?" Gently rebuking this idle inquisitiveness, Jesus replied--"If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me."

This reply involves a principle, and hence it has a wide practical application. It is really addressed to us.

Assuming it to be thus addressed to all at the present day, what does it teach? What does Jesus say to us?

Suppose he stood where I do this moment and you knew it to be Jesus himself, and saw that he was preparing to speak. You see the halo of glory around his head; you note the blending of meekness and majesty that identifies him most fully as one like unto the Son of God, and your whole soul is moved within you to catch every word he may utter. Oh what an earnest expectation! If he were to speak in this house,

you would hear the ticking of that clock more plainly than you now do. If you chanced not to catch every word distinctly, you would ask one and another--What did he say? What was that?

He speaks, you observe, in the form of a positive command; what is this command? Remember, if it be the Lord Jesus Christ, he has the right to command. Who else in earth or heaven has this right more absolutely than he? It must be of the utmost consequence to us to know what he does command us. Whatever it be, it must vitally affect our well-being both to know and to do it. Words from one so benevolent must be for our good. Certainly, he never did speak, but he said things for the good of those to whom he spake.

It must also be for the general good; for the Great King and Lord of all never overlooks what pertains to the general good.

Moreover, it must be safe to obey. Certainly; how can it be otherwise? Did it ever happen that any man obeyed him and found it unsafe?

Of course it must be our DUTY to obey. How can it be that Christ shall ever command us, and we be not bound solemnly to obey him?

Also it must be possible for us to obey. Did Christ ever enjoin impracticable things? Could he possibly do a thing so unreasonable?

All these points must be assumed and admitted. How can we ever doubt a moment on any one of them?

This then is the state of the case. What now should be the attitude of our minds? Manifestly this--Let him speak; we will surely listen and obey. What does he say? Every word he says, I know, will be infinitely good. Let me catch every intimation of his will. "His words shall be sweeter to my taste than honey or the honey comb."

But will any of you turn away saying--"I don't care what he says?" Will you not rather feel this--"Let him say what he will, it is all good and I will surely hear and obey it."

If such be your attitude towards him, then we are ready to examine what he says. Observe, he gives us something to be done, and moreover, something to be done by yourself. No matter just now to you what others may do, or what God's providence may allot to them. "What is that to thee?" It has always been the temptation of the human heart to look at the duties of others rather than one's own. You must resist and put down this temptation. Christ has work for you to do, and it becomes you to address yourself earnestly to do it. Observe also, that it is to be done now. He gives you no furlough, not even to go home and bid farewell to those of your house. He can take no excuse for delay.

Now let us ask--What is this thing which he requires? He says--"Follow thou me." What does this mean? Must I leave my home? Must I abandon my business? Am I to change my residence? Am I to follow him all over the land?

The latter meaning was plainly the true one when Jesus dwelt among men in human flesh. He then called certain men to follow him as his servants and disciples, and they were to attend him in all his journeyings--to go where he went and to stop where he stopped. They were to aid him in his missionary work.

Now, Christ is no longer here in human flesh; and therefore following him cannot have precisely that physical sense. Yet now, no less than then, it implies that you obey his revealed will, and do the things that please him. Now, you are to imitate his example and follow his instructions. By various methods, he still makes known his will, and you are to follow whithersoever he leads. You must accept him as the Captain of your salvation, and let his laws control all your life. He comes to save his people from their sins and from the ruin that sin, unforgiven, must bring down; and you must accept him as such a Savior. This is involved in following him.

But here let us enquire somewhat more fully, What is implied in obeying this command?

Of course it implies confidence in him who commands,--a confidence in the exercise of which you commit yourself fully to obey him and trust all consequences to his disposal. There can be no hearty, cheerful obedience without this implicit confidence.

It implies also a willingness to be saved by him--that is, saved from sin. You make no reservation of favorite indulgences; you go against all sin and set yourself earnestly to withstand every sort of temptation.

It involves also a present decision to follow him through evil or good report--whatever the effect may be on your reputation. You are ready to make sacrifices for Christ, rejoicing to be counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.

It is a very common fault to admit what Christ requires, yet to fail very much in doing it. This is saying, I go, sir--but going not. Such a man does not follow Christ.

He requires immediate action. He has work for you to do to-day, and he demands of you that you commit yourself to full obedience.

Let us next enquire--WHY shall we follow him?

Suppose Christ were here personally and from this desk announced this command--Follow thou me. Would you ask to know why? You could very soon assign some weighty reasons. Your own mind would suggest them. And do you know any reasons why you should not follow him? I presume it is settled in every mind why you should obey this command now and here, without one moment's delay. Is there any of you that can assign any reason why you should not obey this command? Does any of you doubt at all whether this be your duty? Can you think of any reason why it is not?

Then it must be your duty, and you ought to do it. The matter should lie in your mind thus--If this is my duty, of course I must do it at once. Doing duty is the business of my life.

You owe it to Jesus Christ to follow him. If you are a student, none the less should you follow Jesus everywhere. See that young man. You ask him why he goes to college; what does he say? Does he say--Because I would be better prepared to teach men about Jesus Christ? Coming to his teachers, does he say--Give me an education; give me all the discipline of mind and heart you can, that I may be the better able to teach and preach Jesus Christ? Tell me all you know of Christ; pray for me that God may teach my heart the whole gospel? Is this what he says? In this sort of way should a Christian student follow Christ.

Do you not owe this to him? Can any one of you deny this? Have you any right to live to yourselves? If you could gain some good for the moment, could you think it right to have your own way, and disown Christ?

What if you were to gain the whole world and lose your own soul?

You owe it to yourself to take care of your own soul. God lays on you the responsibility of saving your own soul, and you must bear it. No man can bear that responsibility for you. You must bear it for yourself alone.

You owe it to your friends to follow Christ. You have friends over whom you may exert a precious influence. For their sakes you ought to know Christ, that you may lead them also to follow him. You have friends also who have done much for you and have loved you much. It is due from you to them that you should follow Christ. You owe it to your father and mother. Are they praying souls? It is due to the sympathy they feel for you and to the strong desire they have for your salvation. If they have never prayed, it is time they did, and time that you should lead them to Christ.

You owe it to the whole world. There are millions who know not Jesus, some of whom you might teach so that they shall not die and never have known him.

One more thought as to yourself. Such as you make yourself by obeying or not obeying this precept, you will be to all eternity. What you do in this matter will have its fruits on your destiny long after the sun and stars shall have faded away. You have no right to live so that when you die, men shall say--There goes from earth one nuisance, and hell has more sin in it now than it ever had before.

Again; this is the only path of peace. If you would have peace, you must seek and find it here. Here thousands have found it; but none ever found it any where else.

Jesus Christ says to you--"Follow thou me." Will you set yourself to find some excuse? What are your excuses?

Do you say--"There are so many opinions among men. I don't know what to do."

Ah but you do know. It is only a pitiful pretense when you say you don't know your duty. Who of you does not know enough to be simple-hearted and to go on in duty and please God? No opinions of men need stumble you if you simply follow Christ. You talk about the various opinions among Christian sects;--but differ much as they may in lesser matters, on the great things of salvation, they are all agreed. They all agree essentially, that to follow Christ in confidence and simple love is the whole of duty and will ensure his approbation. Follow this simple direction, and all will be well with you.

But some will say--"I believe all will be saved."

You do, indeed! Will they all become like Christ before they die? Do they all in fact become holy in this world? Christ is in heaven. Can you go there unless you become first like him in heart and in life?

What is such a belief good for? Often has this question been forced on my mind in Boston--what is this belief that all men will be saved, good for? People plead this belief as their excuse for not following Christ. They say--"No need to trouble ourselves with following Christ, since we shall all come right at last any how." Can this belief make men holy and happy? Some of you will answer--"It makes me happy for the present, and that is the most I care for." But does it make you holy? Does it beget true Christian self-denial and real benevolence? A faith and a practice which make you happy without being holy are but a poor thing. Indeed, it cannot fail of being utterly mischievous, because it lures and pleases without the least advance towards saving your soul. It only leaves you the more a slave of sin and Satan.

But you say--"It makes me so miserable to believe that any will be forever lost!"

What then? What if it does make you feel unhappy? It may make you unhappy to see your guilty friend sent to the penitentiary or the gallows now; but such a doom may be none the less deserved--none the less certain, because it hurts your feelings.

How can there be any other way of final happiness save through real holiness? The fountain of all happiness must lie in your own soul. If that is renewed to holiness and made unselfish, loving, forgiving, humble--then you will be happy of course, but you cannot be happy without such a character.

Some of you may say--"I don't believe in the necessity of a change of heart."

Yes you do; you are altogether mistaken in regard to the matter if you suppose you don't believe in the necessity of a change of heart. There cannot be such a man in all Christendom--a man who does not know that by nature his heart is not right with God; yet that it must become right with God before he can enjoy God's presence in heaven. Is there one whose conscience does not testify that, before conversion, his heart is alienated from God? Do you not know that you are unlike God in spirit? and that you must be changed so as to become like God before you can enjoy him? What! a sinner, knowing himself to be a sinner, believe he can be happy in God's presence without a radical moral change! Impossible! Every man knows that the sinner, out of sympathy with God, must be changed before he can enjoy God's presence and love. Every man, unchanged by God's grace, knows himself to be a sinner and not holy by nature.

A case in point to show the force of truth on even hardened hearts, came lately to my knowledge. A Christian lady being on a visit to one of the towns in Canada, was called on by a gentleman of high standing in society, but who had always lived a prayerless, ungodly life. A man of strong will and nerves, professedly a skeptic, he yet took the ground before this Christian lady that he was ready, as a means of becoming a Christian, to do any thing that she should say. Well then, said she, kneel down here and cry out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." What! replied he, [""]do this when I don't believe myself a sinner?" You need not excuse yourself on that ground, said she, for you know you are a sinner. Having passed his word of honor to a lady, he could not draw back, and therefore kneeled and repeated the proposed words. Arising, he asked, what next? Do so again; and say the same words. He raised the old objection--I don't believe myself a sinner. She made the same answer as before, and a second time he repeated the words of that prayer. The same things were said--the same thing done, the third time, and then, hardened as he was, his heart felt the force of those words, and he began to cry in earnest--"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" His heart broke, and he prayed till mercy came!

So often, when men say they don't believe this and that, they do believe it so far as conviction is concerned. They know the truth respecting their own guilt.

But you plead, perhaps, this: I must attend to other duties first; my studies, or my business.

No, my friend; no other duties can come before this. This is the greatest duty and ought to be the first. Hear what the Savior said on this very point. He said to one man--"Follow me;" and he answered--"Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father." This is a strong case, and is placed on record for our instruction because it is strong. It may seem to you very unnatural that Jesus would call any man away from a duty so obvious and so inborn in every human heart; yet what did he say? He gave no heed to this plea, but answered--"Let the dead bury their dead; but go thou and preach the kingdom of God." Not even the last rites of burial to the dead, must be allowed to stand before obedience to Christ's call. No doubt Christ saw

a disposition in this man to plead off, and therefore, he saw the necessity of meeting it promptly. Suppose the man had said at first, "Yes, Lord, I am ready; my father lies unburied; but I am ready if thou callest me, to follow thee even now;" it is at least supposable if not probable, that Jesus would have answered--Yes; I will go with thee to that funeral. Let us lay the dead solemnly in their last bed, and then go to our preaching.

Another man replied to his call, saying, "Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go and bid them farewell which are at home in my house." To him, Jesus replied, "No man having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Thus Christ teaches that no duty can possibly come before this of giving up your heart to follow him. You must make up your mind fully to this life-business, and really enter upon it--else all things else are only an offence to God.

Do you say, I must study? You must first make up your mind to do all for Christ,--else study can be no acceptable duty. When Jesus says to you--"My son, give me thy heart," he wants nothing else instead of your heart. He does not wish to be put off with some other duty, than the very one he calls for. When he says--"Follow me;" he demands an explicit answer, whether you will or no, (sic.) and he cannot accept anything evasive.

REMARKS.

1. You are now, each one of you, called to follow Christ, with the implied pledge on his part, that if you give yourself to him, he will give himself to you. Think of that. Would it not be a blessed thing to have Christ give himself to you, to be your eternal Friend--your Portion and Joy forever?

Suppose Jesus were passing along here, and were calling one and another by name to follow him. When he came near you, would you not be saying in your heart--I hope he will certainly call me? Or can it be you would say--I hope he will not call me! Can it be you could say that? Would you not rather say--Oh is it possible he will pass me by; how awful! Can it be? And if so, shall I never see him passing by so near again?

O sinner, Jesus is now passing by you, so near; arise and speak to him for he does call you; and you must decide now whether you will follow him or not--and decide for eternity!

2. Don't think about others. Say not as Peter said--"Lord, what shall this man do?" This is an old and artful device of your adversary--this turning your mind to think about others. If you are wise, you will think about yourself only.

3. It is a great comfort to reach the point where you say--I will follow him any how, let others do as they please. I will go after Christ. This is just what you should say; and when you come to this point with a full heart, you will find it is a most precious decision.

4. You are now called to decide your own future destiny. Some decision upon it you will certainly make. You take a step here to-day which may decide all your future being. Is it not well that you take this step right?

Suppose I should now say--Come, separate yourselves according to the decision you make. All ye who will follow Christ, come into this aisle;--what will you do?

Will you refuse and say--I will not follow Christ yet; I have ends of my own to accomplish first; I will not be his servant now? Is this your decision? Shall we ask to have it put on record? It will go on record any how, whether you ask it or not.

Some of you will perhaps say--I will not decide just now. I did not come here to-day expecting to decide so great a question at this time.

What, indeed! Did not you expect to hear a gospel sermon to-day? And did you not know that in every gospel sermon there is in fact a gospel call on you to repent and follow Jesus?

But will you now turn again and say--"Lord, I can't understand, I cannot realize why I should follow thee." Don't say that; for you can understand it. And you can decide this question to-day.

But says some young man--If I should go after him, I am afraid I should have to forego some of my favorite plans for life. I might have to give up my intended profession. Another might be debarred from some lucrative business that pays better than following Christ.

Then you can go and tell your Savior so. Tell him how the case lies. Tell him you cannot trust him to provide for your worldly interests. You are afraid he would send you also to preach the kingdom of God, and might pay you but poorly for your services. Perhaps he will excuse you from his service here and from entering into the joy of your Lord hereafter besides!

There is a young man who says--I can't follow Christ now, because I cannot leave my dear Christian mother. Then go upon your knees and spread out your excuse before the Lord. Say to him--My good mother gave me the best Christian instruction and her constant prayers; she did every thing to make me thy servant; but now since thou art calling me to follow thee, I find I cannot go and preach thy love to a dying world. She cannot spare me and I cannot leave her.

Indeed, you cannot afford to. And your pious mother thinks her claim is above that of the Savior! Well, you must both make your choice.

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