

# On Sinning

by Charles Finney

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*Neglecting known duty is sin and a rejection of all moral principle and duty, and it is essential to salvation and a condition of being accepted by God.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:16, Matthew 7:21, Luke 6:46, John 14:15, Romans 2:13, Galatians 5:6, Ephesians 2:10, James 4:17, 1 Peter 1:15-16, 1 John 2:4

**Topics:** "Obedience", "Moral Responsibility"

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## Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the grave nature of sin, particularly the sin of neglecting known duties as outlined in James 4:17. He argues that true faith must manifest in love and obedience, and that neglecting any known duty is a deliberate rejection of moral obligation to God. Finney clarifies that both Paul and James teach the necessity of works as a condition of salvation, and that failing to act on known duties is tantamount to sin. He warns that living in neglect of duty leads to spiritual deception and ultimately, separation from God. The sermon calls for a commitment to fulfill all known obligations to God and others as a true expression of faith.

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## Transcript

"Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." James 4:17

This is only a part of what the apostle James said to those who supposed they might have true faith and yet neglect the duties required in the moral law. This was the great error of the Antinomians of that day who regarded the gospel as a grand system of indulgences and practically held that faith gave them a license to sin. Their doctrine was that faith in Christ is accepted of God instead of that affectionate obedience which the law requires. Faith, in their view, was a substitute for this in such a sense as to discharge their obligation to have and exemplify this love. It became thus a compromise; faith instead of love and obedience.

Now Paul did indeed preach that men are not justified by their obedience to law and that they cannot hope to be accepted on the ground of their own righteousness. On the contrary, he taught that the ground of their acceptance is in Christ alone--solely in what he has done and suffered for us. Yet he at the same time taught that this faith in Christ always leads to a holy life--always works by love, and therefore always bears the fruits of real holiness.

There were some in the church of those times, as there are in our day, who misapprehended Paul and failed to understand his idea of faith. They made faith a mere opinion, a simple belief in which there is no heart, and this heartless faith they held to be itself saving.

To withstand this grievous error, James taught that works of love and obedience are essential to salvation. Yet Paul and James are not at variance, but teach the same gospel. Paul speaks of works as the ground--James as the condition of salvation. Hence rightly Paul denies and James affirms;--Paul denies that they are the ground of salvation, as he should deny, and as James too would deny. James affirms that they are the condition of salvation and so would Paul and so should we. In maintaining his position James declares that neglect of known duty is sin. This is the doctrine of our text.

The knowledge of duty implies obligation. Only that can be duty to me which I am bound to perform. Hence the ideas of duty and of obligation are closely related.

Knowledge of personal duty necessitates some moral action of the mind. It is impossible to remain indifferent and not take some form of moral action when duty is really seen. Not to act at all under these circumstances is out of the question--is simply impossible. The stimulus of known duty being applied to the mind, it must act.

The proof of this lies in human consciousness, and to this I appeal. Every body knows that when the conviction of duty fastens on the mind, he acts one way or the other. He obeys, or he refuses to obey.

Here note also that neglect to comply with obligation always implies a refusal. For the time being at least, you refuse to meet your obligation by obeying the demand of duty. The demand called on you to do something; you answered, no! In the nature of the case you must either consent to comply or you must refuse.

In such a case, there is always a positive going forth of the will to refuse, or to comply.

Again, if inaction were possible, it would be sin. For, action is the thing required. Inaction is therefore the thing forbidden. Neglect to act, therefore is positive disobedience.

The action which this subject contemplates is that of the will, the free action of the mind. And here it is quite essential to note that the will is not something separate from the mind, as for example, the hand; but is the mind itself, willing.

Neglect to obey obligation implies as opposite willing--a committal to an opposite course of action. When you refuse to meet obligation, you do so because you purpose and choose not to meet it.

I do not stop here to agitate the question whether there can be any other duty than known duty. This would lead us into a field of enquiry foreign from our present object.

To neglect to comply with known duty is to reject the claims of moral obligation. Suppose a man sees that God requires of him a given duty; but he decides not to do it. What is this but to decide that he will not obey God? and that the idea of duty shall not govern him? Surely this is a decision of the mind not to be influenced by the conviction of known duty.

This is sin, and the whole of sin. Sin is a deliberate decision of the mind, not to obey God. What can be sin if this is not?

While one known duty is neglected, none can be acceptably performed. For example, suppose a man neglects some known duty, and yet professes to do something else and call it duty; is this obedience to God? Nay, it is only a delusion of his own mind, or an act of downright hypocrisy. James says--"Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." For if a man refuses to do one known duty, he shows himself in no state of mind to do God's will. If he can refuse to comply with any one known obligation, how can he possibly perform any other duty in a way that God can accept?

To refuse to perform any one known duty is a virtual denial of moral obligation and a plain refusal to obey God at all. It is virtually telling God that you care not what He requires, that you shall take your own course and do what you please. If you were to take your oath not to obey God, it would not be a more emphatic refusal than you make when you refuse to perform one well known duty. Yea if a man were to go about the streets, proclaiming, "I don't care what God requires; I shall do as I please about obeying him, and shall take the liberty of omitting to do anything whatever which he requires, whenever it pleases me to do so; let no man suppose that I intend to obey God simply because he commands me"--even this shocking declaration would not be so emphatic as his action in refusing to do known duty. It always will be true that "actions speak louder than words."

Again, for a man to know his duty and yet not do it, is moral dishonesty--is a total repudiation of all moral principle, and, an open rejection of all moral duty. I know a young man who said he had made up his mind to obey God. Subsequently, however, he fell under adverse influences and then changed his mind and said--How can I afford to serve God? On hearing this remark, I said to him--"You are a dishonest man; nobody can trust you a moment." He seemed surprised at this, and would fain appear to feel hurt, as if I had slandered him, for he had piqued himself very much on his moral honesty. But let us examine this principle. Suppose a man who owes you for goods comes into your store, and you very gently suggest to him if it would be convenient to settle that old account, he says, no. Why not? Have not you the money? Yes, he says, I have the money, but I want to use it. I will pay you at my convenience, just when I think best. When will that be, you say? But he only answers, "When I please."

If you should speak out what your heart feels, you would say--You villain! Are you lost to all moral honesty? Can you refuse to meet a known obligation?

Just so the sinner who will not do one known duty, virtually says--I repel the idea of moral obligation. I hope you don't suppose that obligation to God has any binding force on me! Do you think I care for any supposed obligation to God--or that I care for duty to him?

That, Sinner, is what your practical life proclaims when you know your duty and do it not. That is just what you do. And is not that as bad as the devil? The only reason why you are not fully as bad as the devil is that you don't know as much.

Is this too strong language? No, verily, I should only blink this momentous question and deceive you, if I did not tell you that you are as bad as the devil.

Again, neglect to perform duty is the true idea of impenitence. This is the very thing. Impenitence is not a mere negation--is not a nothing; but is precisely a refusal to perform known duty.

A persistent neglect of any known duty is sin, and must be fatal to the soul.

## REMARKS.

They who neglect their duty to God never really fulfill any duty to man. Men who disown obligation towards God do not care anything about duty; it is not the consideration of duty that moves you. Unless you have a supreme respect for God and his will, there is no doing of duty. Thus the man who neglects prayer to God can never be accepted in anything he does for man. Suppose he were a very pertinacious Anti-Slavery man, or Temperance man; but he never honors God, and pays him no respect even; then it is plain that his principles of reform are all rotten.

No one who does perform duty to God will neglect duty towards man. His sense of obligation to God and his practical submission to that sense of duty will certainly ensure his obedience in the lesser duties due towards his fellow-beings. If the doctrine of this text be true, he cannot be pious without being philanthropic also. If he performs his duty towards God, he will also towards man. If he neglects his duty towards God, he will also neglect his duty towards man.

You may as well blink the duty of prayer and praise as neglect anything else.

No man can neglect his duty towards a suffering fellow-man while his wants are crying out for relief, and yet be a Christian towards God. He cannot be truly pious unless his mind is made up to serve God fully in all classes of duty.

He who neglects a public profession of religion--how can he hope to be saved? Not that a public profession is in its nature saving, but it is plainly required and therefore becomes every Christian's duty. No requisition, plain as this, can be set aside, and yet the man who does it be accepted of God. Suppose the man lives where there is a visible church and there is no reason why he should not do this duty; yet he does not come out and place himself on the Lord's side, but he thinks notwithstanding, that he shall be accepted of God. How many make this very mistake! Because a man is not saved by a public profession, therefore they neglect it. This is the same mistake as that made by the Antinomian. Because he does not expect to be saved by his works, therefore he feels no interest in performing good works. Shall he not be saved without? Why then should he trouble himself about doing laborious duties? The truth is--whosoever will neglect known duty ought to know that he cannot be accepted in anything.

The same is true of those who allow themselves to live below their convictions, and their expressed obligations. I admit that a man may be suddenly thrown off the track of his purposed life; the purpose was to do God's will--that is, if he were a true Christian. The very moral attitude that makes one a Christian is that of a determined resolution and purpose of heart to do all God's will, always and every where. With this purpose living in one's heart in its power, he is a true Christian. If he is thrown off the track, his first concern is to get back with the least delay possible. But if persons allow themselves to live in this guilty sinning state, they cannot be saved.

So also if they allow themselves to live below their privileges. Some persons attempt here to set up a very curious distinction between living in known sin and living below their privileges. They would be alarmed if they knew they were living in known sin; but it seems to them a small matter that they are living below their known privileges. Just as if it were not their duty to live up fully to all their privileges. Just as if the grace provided in Christ and in the Spirit for the Christian's growth and strength and power for good, might be neglected without sin!

The great error of this day is the practical assumption that Christians may be accepted on the whole, although they allow themselves to do many things against known duty. Visit the churches all through the land, and you will find this assumption underlying their piety. They admit that they are living in known sin, yet they have family prayers, they pay for preaching, they give to various benevolent objects, and they are, as they think, Christians. Sometimes the pulpit connives at this soul-destroying sentiment. But is it for the Christian pulpit to teach that a man can do his duty in some things while yet he neglects known duty in other things?

This assumption seems to underlie the hopes of the masses of modern Christians. Do you not see this to be the fact?

The true doctrine is--You have no right to hope save as you find yourself committed to do the whole will of God;--none at all, save as you cry out--if you fall into sin--"Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy; though I fall I shall rise again." You spring back to regain the ground you have lost. There is a sudden and powerful reaction; for you cannot live in sin. Peter differed from Judas; Peter was impulsive, generous, ardent, made for a leader. You see his characteristic features in the case of our Lord's washing the disciples' feet. At first it seemed to him too bad that the Lord should perform for him so menial an office; and he declared outright--"Thou shalt never wash my feet." But when our Lord signified to him that, otherwise, he could have no part in him, then, changing his attitude entirely, he wanted to be washed all over! No doubt he was sincere when he said--"Though all men forsake Thee, yet will not I." Yet when temptation's power came heavily and suddenly on him, he fell. It was a sad fall; but soon Christ turned and looked on him, with one look of love and rebuke. Then Peter thought; and thinking, wept; wept as if his tears would never cease to flow. One fearful wave of temptation had torn him from his moorings; but see how soon he springs back again. Christ cast one look on him and he weeps bitterly. He did not wait for the cause to become popular before he should espouse it again; but, just then and there, while the peril was as great as ever and the scandal was unabated--there, in the presence of all those external temptations under which he had fallen, he returns to his Lord. O, if you had seen him weep there, you would have said--Certainly that man is a real Christian! How he springs back after his guilty lapse! As a wife or husband who have been betrayed into some offence against each other will suddenly return to their kindly and endearing relations to each other, so does the real Christian, for he cannot live away from Christ.

You see the great mistake of those who think one may be really honest and yet neglect some known duty. You call such a man honest; but in what sense can you? In the sense of having due regard to his moral obligations? Certainly not; for of this regard, he has not a particle. If he had he could not neglect one known duty.

The common standard of piety is utterly fallacious. It holds practically that we may neglect this and that moral duty and still have a good hope in Christ. Nothing can be more fallacious than this idea.

Those who believe in the entire attainability of sanctification and yet neglect the known and appropriate means and efforts to reach this attainment, are fatally deceived. They know their duty, but they do it not. They know their privilege and know that this privilege brings with it the obligations of duty, yet they fail to accept this offered mercy. They come short deliberately and with their own real consent. Alas, they are fatally deceived. They "hold the truth in unrighteousness."

The same is true of all who admit this attainment to be their duty, and yet come short of it. There are many of this class who admit entire sanctification to be their duty, while they do not admit that it is attainable.

Now it is all in vain for this class to deny their responsibility. It is duty and nothing but duty that brings on us responsibility. They admit entire sanctification to be their duty; how then can they escape the responsibility for attaining it? Knowing it to be their duty, if they do not strive and struggle to realize it, they are in great guilt and are surely deceived as to their own religious state.

In the discussions of this subject that took place several years ago, the Presbytery of Troy maintained that men were under obligation to be indefinitely better than they are. They did not tell us how much better--did not define the precise limits of possible and binding attainment, and show us how much there is beyond that line that we cannot reach; but they said we all can become indefinitely better than we are. They said we might all hope to rise a good deal higher. Now persons who believe precisely this, and yet rest short of reaching it, must be lost. They know to do good, but do it not; and to them it must be sin.

It matters nothing whether they admit that men may reach entire sanctification, or hold only they may rise indefinitely higher and be a great deal better, so as to be almost sanctified;--no matter how much or how little beyond their present state they know that they can attain, it is all the same as to the principle now being considered; the guilt of failing to do known duty is the same. Each alike is a case of knowing duty and not doing it. If a man does not commit himself to do his best and utmost; if he does not attempt to rise to the highest point possible in his view of his duty, then he is deceiving himself if he thinks himself a Christian, accepted of God. For what is true religion? An obedient spirit; a state in which one lives in the performance of all known duty. No one can allow himself to stop short of universal and entire obedience to God and yet be a Christian. Is not this certain? The very fact of his living in allowed and habitual sin convicts him of being a sinner. What stronger evidence can there be than this? Even Pres. Edwards held that living in known sin is conclusive evidence of an impenitent state. It is not easy to see how any man can deny this.

Those who believe entire sanctification possible should no longer act on the defensive. They should affirm men's obligation to do all known duty and to accept all their revealed privileges. I have been often asked of late--Do you believe that a man can live without sin? I answer--Do you believe a man ought to live without sin? They go on--Do you believe that anybody does? That is another question entirely. Our question now turns on known duty, and accruing obligations. The great question is--What is the state and coming doom, of those who know their duty, yet will not do it? What is to become of us if we are bound to reach perfection, and will not do it?

Is it not time, then, that we who believe in the duty of men to be holy should act on the offensive and maintain the universal duty of all men to deny all ungodliness and to walk holy and unblameably in this present world? What is living a Christian life but committing one's self fully to do all the will of God?

People need not think to escape responsibility by giving up great truths.

It has been sometimes said that the Oberlin people have given up some of their doctrines because they have found them too broad. But of what use can it be to give up doctrines known to be true; for if the conviction remains that you ought to obey God wholly and universally, then you must make up your mind to do all this or have no salvation. If you blink this, you fall from grace.

You who profess to be Christians, yet live in neglect of known duty, are fatally deceived. If you live on and on, below your standard of known duty, not earnestly agonizing and energizing;--living on and neglecting all due effort to perform your known duty,--you are fatally deceived. You are not obeying God and are not in a state of acceptance before him.

You see where this subject places all the unconverted. You who are in this state are guilty of the whole of sin. Your very life is a perpetual scene of knowing yet not doing duty. Each day is full of precisely this experience. And what shall the end be of such a life?

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