

# Practical Christian Living

by Charles Finney

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*Charles Finney's sermon emphasizes the necessity of faith in Christ for true sanctification and holiness, warning against the pitfalls of relying on works.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:48, Matthew 11:27, Mark 11:24, John 6:45, Romans 8:1, 1 Corinthians 1:30, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 4:19, 2 Timothy 3:5, Revelation 3:17

**Topics:** "Faith vs. Works", "Sanctification"

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## Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of faith over works in the pursuit of sanctification, arguing that many Christians mistakenly rely on their own efforts to achieve holiness rather than fully embracing Christ's role as their Savior and sanctifier. He critiques the 'religion of works' that leads believers to think they can earn God's favor through good deeds or preparatory distress, rather than coming to Christ as they are. Finney calls for a radical shift in understanding, urging Christians to receive Jesus in all His functions, including as their King and source of wisdom, to truly overcome sin and grow in holiness. He warns that without this complete reliance on Christ, the Church will remain spiritually stagnant and ineffective. Ultimately, he encourages believers to draw upon the promises of God found in Scripture for their sanctification and spiritual growth.

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## Transcript

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" -- Matthew 5:48.

The Church is not sanctified, and we ought to know why. If the defect is in God, we ought to know it. If He has not provided a sufficient revelation or if the power of the Holy Spirit is not adequate to sanctify His people, we ought to understand it so we don't perplex ourselves with vain endeavors. But if the fault is in us, we ought also to know it, lest we charge God foolishly by imagining He has required of us what we cannot attain.

### THE RELIGION OF WORKS

The first general reason for people not being sanctified is that they seek sanctification by works and not by faith. The religion of works assumes a great variety of forms, and it is interesting to see the shifting forms it takes.

One form is where men try to render their damnation unjust. It doesn't matter whether they think they are Christians or not if they are trying to live so as to make it unjust for God to send them to hell. This was the religion of the Pharisees. And there are many today whose religion is purely of this character. You will often find them ready to confess they have never been born again. But they speak of their own works in a way to make it obvious they think they are too good to be damned.

Many people are seeking by their works to recommend themselves to the mercy of God. They know they deserve to be damned and will forever deserve it. But they also know that God is merciful; and they think that if they live honest lives and do kind things for the poor, God will forgive their sins and save them.

This is the religion of most modern moralists. Living under the gospel, they know they cannot be saved by works. Yet they think that if they go to church and help support the minister, etc., they will recommend them to God's mercy. I understand this is the system of religion held by modern Unitarians. Whether they understand or admit it, it comes to this. They set aside the atonement of Christ and don't expect to be saved by His righteousness. They seem to have a sentimental religion. With their morality and their liberality, they depend on the mercy of God. On this ground they expect to receive forgiveness for their sins.

Another form of the religion of works is when people try to prepare themselves to accept Christ. They understand that salvation is only through Jesus Christ, and they know they can't be saved by works or by the general mercy of God. But they have heard that others went through a long process of distress before they submitted to Christ and found peace in believing. They think a certain preparatory process is necessary and they must pray and run here and there to attend meetings. They lie awake many nights and suffer much distress, perhaps falling into despair. Then they feel they are ready to accept Christ.

This is the situation of many convicted sinners. When they are awakened and find they cannot be saved by their works, they then prepare to receive Christ. Perhaps some of you are like this. You dare not come to Jesus as you are. You have prayed little, attended few meetings, and felt little distress. Instead of going to Christ and throwing yourself unreservedly into His hand, you lash your mind into more conviction and distress in order to prepare yourself to accept Him.

Suppose an individual conceived this as the way to become holy. Every Christian can see this is absurd. However he may multiply such works, he is not beginning to approach holiness. The first act of holiness is to believe--to take hold of Christ by faith. If a Christian feels the need of holiness and tries to go through a preparatory process of self-created distress before he comes to Christ, he is just as absurd as an awakened sinner for doing it.

## WORKING TO CREATE HOLINESS

Many individuals perform works to create faith and love. We suppose them to have come to Christ, but having backslidden they set themselves to perform works to beget faith and love or to beget and perfect a right state of feeling. This is one of the most common and subtle forms in which the religion of works shows itself today.

This is a ludicrous attempt to produce holiness by sin. If the feelings are not right, the act is sin. Yet people think they can create holiness by purely sinful conduct. Any act that does not spring from love is sinful. The individual acts not from the impulse of faith that works by love and purifies the heart, but he acts without faith and love, with a design to beget those affections by actions.

When faith and love exist and are the propelling motives to action, carrying them out in action has a tendency to increase them. This arises from the known laws of the mind, by which every power and every faculty gains strength by exercise. But these individuals have left their first love, if every they had any. Then they set themselves, without faith or love, to bustle about doing things.

How absurd to think of waking up faith in the soul where it does not exist by performing outward acts from some other motive. It is mocking God. Pretending to serve God in such a way grieves the Holy Spirit and insults God.

As far as the philosophy is concerned, it is similar to the conduct of convicted sinners. But there is one difference: the sinner, in spite of all his wickedness, may eventually see his own helplessness and renounce all his own works. He may feel that his continued refusal to come to Christ is only heaping sins against God. But it is different for those who think themselves to be Christians.

Many persons who abound in religious acts are often the most hardened and removed from spiritual feeling. If performing religious duties was the way to produce right Christian feeling, we should expect that ministers and leaders would be the most spiritual. But where faith and love are not in exercise, people become hardened, cold, and full of iniquity in their outward acts. Without any spiritual life, they will become more hardened and stupid. Or if they get spiritually excited in this way, it is a superficial state of mind that has nothing holy in it.

Another reason why so many people are not holy is this: They do not receive Christ in all His functions as He is offered in the gospel. Most people are entirely mistaken here. They will never get ahead until they learn there is a radical error in the manner in which they attempt to attain holiness.

Suppose an individual is convicted of sin. He sees that God may in justice send him to hell, and that he has no way out. Now tell him of Christ's atonement. Show him how Christ died so that God could be just and yet the justifier of them that believe in Jesus. He sees it to be exactly what he needs and in faith throws himself upon Jesus for justification. He accepts Him as his justification, and that is as far as he understand the gospel. He believes, is justified, and feels the pardon of his sin.

Now, here is the very attitude in which most convicted sinners stop. They see Christ as Savior, the propitiation of their sins, to make atonement and procure forgiveness--and there they stop. After that, it is often exceedingly difficult to get their attention to what Jesus offers. Say what you will in regard to Christ as the believer's wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and all His functions as a Savior from sin--they don't feel they need Him in these relations.

## GIVING UP YOUR THRONE

The converted person feels at peace with God. Joy and gratitude fill his heart, and he rejoices in having found a Savior that will stand between him and his Judge. He may have really submitted, and for a time he follows God's commandments. But eventually he finds the working of sin in his members--unsubdued pride, his old temper breaking forth, and a multitude of enemies assaulting his soul--and he is not prepared to meet them.

Until now, he has regarded Jesus as a Savior to save him from hell. The great mass of professing Christians lose sight, almost altogether, of many of the most important functions that Christ offers to believers. When the convert finds himself brought under the power of temptation and drawn into sin, he

needs to invite Christ into these areas of his life. He needs to know more of Jesus' provision for him to resist temptation.

This is not fully understood by many Christians. They never really view Christ under His name "Jesus," who saves His people from their sins. They need to receive Him as a King, to take the throne in their hearts and rule over them with absolute and perfect control, bringing every faculty and every thought into subjection. The reason why the convert falls under the power of temptation is that he has not submitted his own will to Christ in everything.

Christians complain that they cannot understand the Bible, and they are always in doubt about many things. What they need is to receive Christ as wisdom and to accept Him in His function as the source of light and knowledge.

Who of you now attach a full and definite idea to the text that says we are "in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto wisdom, and righteous, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30)? What do you understand by it? It doesn't say He is a justifier, a teacher, a sanctifier, and a redeemer, but that He is wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption. What does that mean? Until Christians find out by experience and know what the Scripture means, how can the Church be sanctified?

The Church is now like a branch plucked from a vine. Unless she abides in Christ, she cannot bear fruit. If a branch had power to voluntarily separate itself from the vine and then should try to produce fruit, what would you think? The Church is the same. Until Christians go to the eternal source of sanctification, wisdom, and redemption, they will never become holy. If they would become, by faith, absolutely united with Jesus, in all His offices and functions, then they would know what holiness is. He is the light and the life of the world. To be sanctified by Him, they must embrace Him and receive grace and knowledge, which alone can purify the soul and give the complete victory over sin and Satan.

If an individual isn't deeply convicted of his own depravity and his need to overcome the power of sin, he will never receive Jesus Christ into his soul as King. When men try to help themselves out of sin and feel strong enough to cope with their spiritual enemies, they never receive Christ fully or rely solely on Him to save them from sin.

But when they have tried to keep themselves by their own watchfulness and prayers, binding themselves by resolution and oaths to obey God, they find nothing but depravity. Then they feel their helplessness and begin to ask what to do.

#### GOD'S PROMISE BOOK

The Bible teaches all this plainly enough. If people would believe the Bible, they would know from the beginning their need of a Savior. But they don't receive or believe the Word until they try to work out their own righteousness. They soon find out they are nothing without Christ. Therefore, they don't receive Him in this function until they have spent years in vain, self-righteous attempts to sanctify themselves. Having begun in the spirit, they try to perfect themselves in the flesh.

Others, when they see their own condition, don't receive Christ as a Savior from sin because they are unwilling to abandon all sin. They know that if they give themselves up entirely to Christ, all sin must be abandoned; and they have some idol they are unwilling to give up.

Many people suppose they are under a fatal necessity to sin, and they drag along this load of sin until their death. They don't directly charge God and say in words that He has made no provision for such a case as this. But they appear to suppose that Christ's atonement will cover all sins. They think that if they continue in sin all their days, He will forgive them and it will be just as well as if they had been truly holy. They don't see that the gospel has made provisions to rid us forever of all sin. They look at it as a system of pardon, leaving the sinner to drag his load of sin to the gate of heaven.

Oh, how little use Christians make of those great and precious promises. We have only to draw upon Him, and we will have whatever we need for our sanctification. "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24).

Christians do not really believe much that is in the Bible. Imagine you met God, and you knew it was God Himself. Suppose He held out a book in His hand and told you to take it. This book contained great and precious promises of all you needed to resist temptation, overcome sin, become perfectly holy, and fit yourself for heaven. Then He told you whenever you need anything, you only have to take the appropriate promise and present it to Him, and He will do it.

Now, if you were to receive such a book directly from the hand of God, and you knew that God had written it for you, would you believe it? Would you read it a great deal more than you now read the Bible? How eager you would be to know all that was in it. How ready to apply the promises in time of need! You would want to know it by heart! You would keep your mind familiar with its contents and be ready to apply the promises you read.

The Bible is that book! It is written by God and filled with such promises. Any Christian, by laying hold of the right promise and pleading it, can always find all he needs for his spiritual benefit.

Jesus is a complete Savior. All the promises of God are in Him to the glory of God the Father. God has promised them in the second Person of the Trinity and made them all certain through Him. Christians need to understand these promises and believe them.

Suppose they lack wisdom. Let them go to God and plead the promise. Suppose they cannot understand the Scriptures, or the path of duty is not plain. The promise is plain enough--take it. Whatever they lack of wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, only let them go to God in faith and take hold of the promise.

## SHATTERING YOUR PRIDE

Many people don't receive Jesus in all His functions because they are too proud to relinquish all self-dependence or reliance on their own wisdom and will.

How great a thing for the proud heart of man to give up its own wisdom, knowledge, will, and everything, to God! I have found this the greatest of all difficulties. Doubtless all find it so. All that God says must be true, whether we in our ignorance and blindness can see the reasonableness of it or not. If we go beyond this, we go beyond the proper province of reason.

But how unwilling the proud heart of man is to lay aside all its own vain wisdom and become like a little child under the teaching of God. The apostle says, "If any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know" (1 Corinthians 8:2). There is a vast meaning in this. A person that doesn't receive Christ alone as his wisdom knows nothing.

If he is not taught by Jesus Christ, he has not learned the first lesson of Christianity. "Neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). The individual who has learned this lesson feels that he has not one iota of knowledge of any value besides what is taught by Jesus Christ. For it is written, "And they shall be all taught of God" (John 6:45).

Christians need to be searched thoroughly, shown their defects, brought under conviction, and then pointed to where their great strength lies. With their everlasting parade of dead works, they need to be shown how poor they are. "Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17).

Until Christians are shown their poverty and the infinite emptiness and abominable wickedness of their dead works, the Church will go further and further from God. It will have only the form of godliness, denying this power thereof. (See 2 Timothy 3:5).

When you see the Christian character defective in any way, you can always know that the individual needs to receive Christ more fully to supply this defect. This defect in the believer will never be remedied until he sees Christ in that part of his character. By faith he must take hold of Christ to remedy that imperfection.

Suppose a person is selfish. He will never remedy that defect until he receives Christ as his pattern. Then the selfishness will be driven out of his heart by saturating his soul with the infinite love of the Savior. In regard to any other defect, he will never conquer it until he sees that Christ is sufficient.

#### RAISING THE STANDARD OF HOLINESS

Until the standard of holiness is greatly raised among ministers, the piety of the Church will not be elevated. Christians who understand these things should, therefore, constantly pray for ministers. The leaders of the Church must take hold of Christ for the sanctification of their own hearts, and then they will know what to say to the Church on the subject of holiness.

Many people seek holiness by works who don't know they are seeking in this way. They profess they are seeking sanctification only by faith and tell you they know it is vain to seek it in their own strength. But their results show they are seeking by works and not by faith.

If a man is seeking by works, he obviously is relying on performing certain preparatory steps and processes before he exercises saving faith. He is not ready now to accept Christ but thinks he must bring himself into a different state of mind as a preparation. It is at this he is aiming. He is trying without faith to get into a proper state of mind. It is all the religion of works.

How common is such a state of mind among Christians who profess to be seeking holiness. You say you must mortify sin, but the way you go about it is by self-righteous preparation, seeking to recommend yourselves to Christ as worthy to receive the blessing. But you must come right to Christ as an unworthy and ruined beggar to receive at once, by faith, the blessing you need. Like a person in a pit of clay, every struggle of your own sinks you deeper in the clay. All your attempts, instead of bringing you nearer to Christ, are only drawing you further from God.

The sinner, by his preparatory seeking, gains no advantage. He lies, dead in trespasses and sins, removed from spiritual life like a dead corpse, until he comes to the conviction that there is nothing he can do for himself but to go now, as he is, and submit to Christ. As long as he thinks there is something he must do first, he never feels that now is God's time of salvation. As long as the Christian is seeking

sanctification through works, he never feels that now is God's time to give him the victory over sin.

Multitudes deceive themselves because they have seen certain "faith without works" churches roused up, dragging along in death. Where such a church has been found, fed on dry doctrine until the members were as stupid as the seats they sat on, the first thing has been to rouse them up to do something. Perhaps that would bring such a church under conviction and lead them to repentance--not because there is any good in their doings, but because it shows them their deficiencies and awakens their consciences.

The same thing occurs when a careless sinner begins to pray. Everybody knows there is no piety in such prayers, but it calls his attention to the Lord and gives the Holy Spirit an opportunity to bring the truth to his conscience. but if you take a man who has been in the habit of praying from his childhood, whose formal prayers have made cold as a stone, praying will never bring him under conviction until he sees the true character of his ungodly prayers.

Where a church has sunk in stupidity, the most effective way to rouse the people has been to warn sinners of their danger. This gets the attention of the church and often brings many of the people to repentance.

If you take what is called a "working church," where they have been in the habit of enjoying revivals and holding meetings, you will find there is no difficulty in motivating the church to act. But as a general rule, unless there is great wisdom and faithfulness in dealing with the church, every succeeding revival will make their religion more and more superficial. Their mind will become more hardened instead of being convicted.

Tell such a church they are self-righteous and there is no Holy Spirit in their bustling, and they will be affronted. "Don't' you know that the way to wake up is to go to work in religion?" they say. The very fact that activity has become a habit with them show they require a different course. They need first to be thoroughly probed, searched, made sensible of their deficiencies, and brought humble and believing to the foot of the cross.

## GROWING IN HOLINESS

When I was an evangelist, I worked in a church that had enjoyed many revivals, It was the easiest thing in the world to get the church to bring sinners to the meetings. The impenitent would come and hear, but there was no deep feeling and no faith in the church. The minister saw this was ruining the church. Each successive revival made the converts more and more superficial. We began to preach holiness, and the church members writhed under it. The preaching ran directly against their former notions about the way to promote Christianity, and some of them were quite angry. But, after a major conflict, many of them broke and became as humble and teachable as little children.

Multitudes in the churches insist that the way to promote holiness is to work, and they think that by friction they can produce the warm love of God in their hearts. This is all wrong. Bustle and noise will never produce holiness--least of all when people are accustomed to this course.

Do you perform many religious duties yet fall short of holiness? Then throw yourself on the Lord Jesus Christ for sanctification and work to serve Him. You are working for salvation instead of working from a principle of life within, impelling you to the work of the Lord.

Do you have half the perseverance of a sinner? A sinner, driven by the fear of going to hell, exerts himself in works until his strength is exhausted and his self-righteousness is worked up. Feeling that he is helpless

and undone, the sinner throws himself into the arms of Christ. But since you don't have as much perseverance, you don't have as much fear. If you think you are a Christian and that however short of holiness you come, you are still safe from hell and can go to heaven, you are wrong.

Christ is your only hope for sanctification. This is why convicted Christians generally fall short of that submission to Christ for holiness that the convicted sinner exercises for forgiveness.

If the Church grows in holiness, it will grow in works. But it does not always follow that growth in works promotes growth in holiness. Works of religion may greatly increase while the power of Christians is rapidly declining. Often a church that begins to lose its power may be willing to do even more works than ever, but it will not arrest the decline unless the people become broken before God.

Oh, that I could convince the Church they need no other help than Christ and can come to Him for all their needs--wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. How soon they would be supplied from the depths of His infinite fullness!

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