

Prayer for a Pure Heart

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of praying for a clean heart and a right spirit, and outlines the conditions under which such a prayer is acceptable to God.

Scripture: Psalm 51:10, Ezekiel 36:26, Matthew 5:8, Romans 12:1-2, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Philippians 2:13, Hebrews 12:14, James 4:8, 1 Peter 2:11, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Sanctification", "Prayer for Purity"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the profound need for a clean heart and a right spirit, as expressed in Psalm 51:10. He explains that this prayer signifies a deep desire for total sanctification, encompassing not just the will but the entire being, including thoughts and emotions. Finney outlines the conditions for offering this prayer acceptably, such as understanding one's sinfulness, sincere repentance, and a willingness to submit to God's transformative work. He warns against the dangers of ungoverned appetites and the necessity of recognizing one's dependence on God for moral cleansing. Ultimately, Finney encourages believers to seek a pure heart actively, trusting in God's willingness and ability to grant this request in their lives.

Transcript

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." --Ps. 51:10

The term rendered "right" in this passage is in the margin, constant, and this seems to be its precise meaning. A constant, steadfast spirit, as opposed to the fickle and unstable state in which he had so sadly fallen before temptation, was the thing he now desired and sought in earnest prayer.

In discussing the subject brought before us in this passage, I shall,

I. SHOW WHAT THIS PETITION REALLY MEANS.

II. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN OFFERING IT ACCEPTABLY.

I. The terms heart and spirit are used in the Bible in various senses. The term heart often denotes the will, or the voluntary attitude or state of the will. Sometimes it is opposed to flesh, and then is synonymous with mind as distinct from body. In our text, both heart and spirit seem to be used in their widest and most general sense, including the whole mind--not its voluntary powers and states only, but also those which are involuntary. We must suppose that these terms as here used, include other powers than the will, for it

is manifest that his will was substantially in a right state already. He did not regard his will as opposed to God, for his will goes out in this earnest, and apparently most sincere prayer that his whole being might be made pure, and be put in such a state that he should never sin again. It lies on the very face of this psalm that David's will was right before God. Hence he prays for something which he calls a clean heart and a right spirit, which is more than merely a right state of the will -- which may be wisely sought in prayer after one's will is subdued, humbled, yielded to God and submissive. Of course a clean heart and a right spirit, as here used, imply a thorough cleansing or sanctification of the whole mind; including the regulation, or cleansing of the imagination, the thoughts, desires, feelings--all those modifications of the sensibility, and all those habitudes of thought and feeling which so often annoy the Christian and become most distressing and dangerous snares to his soul. These are often spoken of in the Bible as fleshly--"fleshly lusts that war against the soul." David obviously prays that God would do for him all that his omniscient eye saw needful to make and keep himself pure from all sin, forever. He prays to be made right throughout all the powers and habitudes of his being.

II. What is implied in offering it acceptably?

1. That it be offered intelligently. The suppliant must understand what he needs, and have a practical and just apprehension of it. There can be no real prayer without this.

2. This implies, of course, a deep conviction of past sin. One who is not convicted by the Holy Ghost has no conception of what this language means. Indeed, without the illumination and convicting agency of the Spirit, the sinner has no right conceptions of any thing of a spiritual nature. Hence, he needs to be convicted, so as to understand thoroughly the nature of sin; then he will see his need, and feel it deeply. This deep feeling, based on a just apprehension of his sin and guilt, is essential to acceptable prayer for a clean heart.

3. A sincere offering of this prayer implies sincere repentance--a real turning of the will from all sin; for without this there can not be sincere prayer for a clean heart.

4. It implies, also, confession of sin to God. By this I mean more than simply uttering our acknowledgment of sins before God; I mean confessing them as sins committed against God, deeply realizing the power and self-application of David's words--"Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight." Now it is easy, and cheap too, for some men to confess their sins, but truly to understand the nature of sin in its relations to God--to see how odious and how abominably guilty one's own sin is in view of these relations; this is much more than mere oral confession. And yet the suppliant must enter deeply into those views of sin, and realize that for his great sins against God he deserves the divine wrath forever, or he can not throw his whole soul into this prayer for a clean heart and a right spirit.

5. There must also be a deep apprehension of one's danger of falling under temptation. It is plain that David in praying for a clean heart and a right spirit, made use of popular language, but really referred to those things in his constitution and habits which had been to him occasions of great sin. Who does not know that after the will is set right, and has done all it can do towards consecrating the whole being to God, the occasions of sin still exist, and may still act with great energy. For example, the imagination, long trained in the course of sin, long corrupted, polluted, filled with foul images, and terribly under the control of impure associations--this remains to be regulated, renovated, and as we might well say, cleansed, before it can be otherwise than a snare, and a most unfit associate of a right will.

It should however be understood that sin, strictly speaking, belongs to acts of the will only; and that of course, when sin or moral defilement is predicated of other faculties or states of the mind, the language is used in a popular and not a metaphysical sense. While this is true and important to be understood, it still remains true also that our mental associations, our habitudes of both mind and body have been during our life of sin such that they continue after conversion to be active and fruitful occasions of sin. This is illustrated in the case of David. His imagination had not become so regulated, nor had his passions been so crucified and sanctified as to cease to act as occasions and temptations to sin. His lusts and appetites had long been so indulged and so developed by indulgence, that though his will was converted to God, yet it might still be overpowered by their temptations. Every Christian knows more or less of the presence and power of these temptations. He is also conscious that these appetites, feelings, passions, imaginations and habitudes create within the mind a certain uneasiness and sense of loathing as if they were really unclean.

The Bible speaks of "the motions of sins," while we are in the flesh, as "working in our members to bring forth fruit unto death," and it would seem to speak of them in popular language as being sinful. As to the case of David, whoever has had experience in the government of a vitiated sensibility, and of indulged passion, can not read this psalm without seeing what were the workings of his mind. Deeply convicted of his great sin, his mind turns within upon those propensities of such fearful power--those appetites and habitudes, and those workings of a vile imagination which had so woefully ensnared his soul and dishonored his God, and he cries aloud--"O, my God, give me a pure heart--"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."

Hence this prayer implies, as I said, a clear apprehension of those things which become occasions of sin, and involve especially a request for their entire subjugation and cleansing.

Those of you who have read Madame Guyon, noticed that in speaking of the great work wrought in her, she alludes to the fact that her imagination had been greatly polluted, but was at length, through sanctifying grace, so brought under the power of a holy will, as to be no longer a source of conflict as before. So in the case of all Christians, the correction of all these habitudes of mind and wayward imaginings and physical propensities constitutes an important part of the work of moral cleansing.

6. This prayer offered acceptably implies a loathing of these occasions of sin and a deep dread of them. Take, for example, the man who has a polluted imagination. If he be a Christian, will he not find this an occasion of great self-loathing? Deeply ashamed of himself, he often feels as if it would be a relief to him if he could spue out his very self--all those vile pollutions of thought and imagination--and be a new and pure creature. For although the action of the imagination is not itself sin, not being directly a voluntary state of mind, yet it often becomes a most disgusting and loathsome occasion of sin, and consequently in the renewed mind an occasion of great conflict. Hence the strong desire to be made pure in these respects.

7. It involves also an apprehension of our dependence on God to subdue those habitudes of sin. Every one who has tried to manage them himself has learned his own weakness; but ordinarily men learn their weakness and dependence no faster than they gain this experience by efforts to master these propensities to sin. How often does the Christian find himself thrown in to deep agonizing, struggling and struggling a long time perhaps in vain to gain the fixed ascendancy over all within which creates temptations and occasions to sin! When this painful and dear-bought experience has thoroughly taught a man his dependence on God, he can then sincerely ask God to do this great work of moral cleansing for

him. Without the teachings of experience, you can scarcely expect any man to be so sincere and heartily earnest in praying as to prevail. It seems indispensable that every Christian should know, past all doubt or demurring, that he needs God's aid, and can do nothing to the purpose without it.

8. This prayer also implies a confidence in the ability of God to do this work. It is a most remarkable fact that nearly the whole church has embraced the opinion that death must do this work. I speak now only of the masses of professed Christians, for some individuals hold different views, and pray as David did for entire moral cleansing to take place here in time. There is no evidence in this Psalm that David prayed or expected death to do this work; on the other hand he most obviously prayed for a work to be done here and now, and himself expected to live after it was done, and tells God what he shall do after his heart is made clean in answer to his prayers. "Then," says, he, "will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee."

But most Christians in these latter ages of the world have expected and do expect death to do this work, and of course they expect nothing better than to carry along all these loathsome things till they die. A hard lot this, if indeed it were an allotment of Jehovah; but a strange lot for a Christian to impose upon himself by failing to embrace the proffer of almighty aid, in the speedy accomplishment of a universal renewal unto holiness.

Certain others have thought that subduing the propensities is equivalent to their annihilation. This, however is a great mistake; for David who prayed that his whole being might be cleansed, evidently did not expect to lose his imagination altogether, nor indeed did he think of having any other faculty of mind or body annihilated, as if God had created some faculties which are intrinsically evil, and must therefore be expunged from the system before it can be morally pure! Not so, I say, did David think and pray; but on the contrary he prayed virtually that God would regenerate his whole being--overhaul it--make it over, mold it into purity and order, till it should subserve, and not derange the right action of a sanctified will.

9. This prayer implies confidence not only that God is able to answer it, but also not less that He is willing, and moreover that to do it is in accordance with the plans and purposes of his moral government. If he had only believed that God is able, but that He has no purpose, plan or will to do such a thing, under any circumstances of our earthly life, would it not have been blasphemous for him to have offered this prayer? Look at it! Suppose David had believed as some now are understood to hold, that God, though able, had no intention or will to give the Christian a clean heart during this life, would not this prayer of his have been impious? It would be as much as to say--Lord I know thou hast no desire or intention to give thy children a pure heart in this world; but, Lord, we want this blessing, and we want it now, and we can not be denied--let thy purposes stand ever so much opposed to granting the blessing. Now could the Psalmist have offered such a prayer without tempting God? Certainly not. Hence we may infer that he doubtless believed it to be in accordance with God's government and plans to bestow this blessing when earnestly sought by prayer.

I have often known men who had great misgivings whether God did not intend, in all cases, to leave Christians through life impure--their hearts not cleansed in the sense of our text. Consequently if they ever ask for these blessings, they are afraid to believe, and hence they can not possibly cast themselves upon the Lord in such confidence as is essential to prevailing prayer. They know that God is able, but they do not believe Him willing; hence they are greatly troubled, and there can be no strong confidence, no child-like trust in their prayers.

Not so David. Plainly he held God to be willing as well as able. You must certainly admit that David assumed God's willingness to do the very thing he asked, whatever you may suppose that thing to be. The real thing requested in his prayer, he must have supposed God most willing to perform.

10. The sincere offering of the prayer that God would create in us a clean heart implies that on our part we are willing to have the thing done. Persons often have strong desires that something were done, who yet are not willing it should be done. A tooth aches bitterly; they know it ought to come out; O, how they wish it were out now--but are they willing to have it done? That's the trying point. Their desires in the matter are very strong, but don't amount to a willingness. So, often, in regard to wishing and praying for a clean heart. It often happens that persons think they want a pure heart; but when they come to see all that is implied in it, they shrink back, and say, no; we can not meet all those consequences. A striking case of this sort once fell under my observation. A young lady claimed she was willing to become a Christian, and I suppose honestly thought so. I often pressed her with the fact that she was not really willing to become a Christian, but she as often resisted my position and my arguments. Ultimately she heard a sermon which greatly affected her, and brought her to determine that she would not live in her sins any longer. She turned her thoughts in deep earnest towards God--she began to ask Him to take away all her sins--when suddenly she saw so clearly how much would be involved in this, that she shrunk back--withdrew her petition--rose from her knees and went her way. She had found that she did not want to be such a Christian.

So, often, with professed Christians. When they see all that is implied in a clean heart, they turn away. They may have offered this prayer often without at all apprehending how much it implies. When they come to see the whole matter they are conscious of shrinking from meeting such results.

Hence an acceptable offering of this prayer implies that we are willing to have this whole work done--are willing to have every constitutional appetite, passion, tendency and function of either flesh or spirit so modified as to come perfectly under the control of right reason, and of God's revealed will. We must be willing to have our bodies become fit temples for God's indwelling Spirit; every function or faculty of our entire nature being in harmony with a holy heart, being such as would not soil an angel's purity, if his spirit were to inhabit our body, and act through our physical organs.

11. This prayer offered acceptably, implies that we are willing God should do his own work in his own way.

It often happens that really men dictate to God the manner in which things shall be done. They ask only with certain reservations and qualifications--as if they would say--May God be pleased to do this thing provided it shall not touch my idol; may God sanctify all my appetites, so as to bring them under the law of enlightened reason, except this favorite one--spare me this, for I am very partial to it, and it has been such a comfort to me so long! Or perhaps they are afraid to pray right out--without qualification or exception, that God would actually give them a heart universally clean, and a spirit altogether right, lest, if their prayer should be answered it might smite some of the precious things they love. As a woman once said to me--"I dare not ask for sanctification, lest if I should, God should take away my husband!" "But why such fears?" "Because I am conscious that my heart is greatly bound up in him, and I am terribly afraid that God could not sanctify me without tearing him away from my heart."

Of course the woman could not pray--"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." This prayer implies that we are willing to have any sacrifice made which God sees to be necessary; that we yield up ourselves to all the outward training, and also to all the inward training which in the eye of God may appear to be requisite. We submit ourselves to his discretion as to the things to be done--as to

the time, the manner, and all the circumstances of doing it. We do most fully and freely consent that God should use his own infinite wisdom. Let Him smite whatever he sees it best to smite. Let my soul commit itself into his hands to suffer any pain, and endure any sacrifice which his wisdom may choose and his love can inflict. Let me never fear any unreasonable severity from such a Father!

But how often Christians have their own way marked out for God to walk in. They would have Him be careful to deal with themselves very gently, and especially beware not to use his providential rod too roughly. It would suit them well if the Lord would come down upon them as with an electric shock and shake their very souls into purity and holiness. Some sudden and purely spiritual agency is often the thing they are dreaming of, and they prefer that the clean heart shall come in this way rather than by any form of sore trial. They seem not to realize that there are some attachments of such a character that God can not rectify them without seizing upon the loved object, cutting it down, tearing up its very roots, and rending asunder all those tender ligaments which bind our hearts in selfish, idolatrous love to our idol. Every Christian ought to consider that asking God sincerely to create in us a clean heart involves the submission of our entire case to his management, with full permission from us to use the knife, or any thing else He may find necessary for a thorough cure.

12. This prayer, to be acceptable, must involve not only a willingness to have the thing done, but to take with it the consequences which will naturally follow. If the gift of a clean heart involves new relations and new duties, we must meet them cheerfully, and what is more, in anticipation of them we must not shrink; for if we do, we can not have the gift. Thus, for example, it is obviously the duty of those whom God thus blesses to glorify his name. Let them, like the ancient leper, go into the temple to bear their public testimony to saving grace. Or, like David let them be able to say--"I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart, I have not concealed thy loving-kindness and thy truth from the great congregation." Even beforehand let them say as he did--"Deliver me, and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness;" "open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise."

Now many would be very willing to be religious, if they might accomplish it all without any consequent reproach. They might even be happy to be sanctified if they might have the blessing with no attendant dishonor--no sacrifice of reputation; if nobody would talk about them--if none would observe their conduct and their spirit more closely than before. But all such compromises for reputation's sake are vain and ruinous. You must be willing to lay your very self upon God's altar--yourself I say, your all; reputation, name, ease, your estate if need be, your personal liberty if God's providence calls for it, and even your life. Go up with firm, unfaltering step and lay your all upon that altar; then let God do with that offering what He will;--blast it--burn it--blow it to every quarter of the heavens; yet lay it down and say, whether in the fear or the fact of all losses--"These things are thine, O my God--do with them all as thou pleasest. Spare me nothing which thou pleasest to take. I trust thy wisdom and thine infallible love." Now every Christian should know that the gift of a clean heart and a right spirit comes not from God till he is willing to take with it its legitimate consequences--nay more, till he is willing to trust those results to the wisdom of his great Father. You must be willing to be made a spectacle to angels and to men, for God will never light a candle to put it under a bushel. You may lift up your cry the hundredth time for the blessing; still the question will return--Will you glorify God? Will you let your light shine? Will you do all you can to make the gift, if bestowed on you, available to the glory of the Blessed Giver? God asks--Are you willing I should put you in the furnace and heat up the fire to seven-fold fury, and let the world look on to see what grace can do? You greatly mistake if you suppose God does such works of sanctifying mercy for your sake alone. "Not for your sake, be it known unto you, O house of Israel, saith the Holy One, but for my holy name's sake."

Let it then be well understood that you must be willing to meet and bear the trials which God sends. You must expect trials, such trials as will probably call the attention of others to your case. God perhaps would fain profit others by the blessings He gives you. If so, should you rebel? Perhaps He would glorify Himself. If so, shall you shrink? Never. It becomes you rather to glory in tribulation, outward or inward--for it is sweet even by suffering, to be made the passive instruments of glorifying our Father in heaven. Let the burning trial come, if the grace of God thereby shines the more brightly. It is the manner of our God to make the holiness of his people and the riches of his own grace shine most gloriously in the furnace of affliction.

REMARKS.

1. I remark first what I have already said in substance but repeat here, that David intended to be sanctified in the present life. His will at the time of his offering the prayer in the text was already right, but he had other things about him which were not right, and his soul was fixed to have them corrected. His vile imagination must be regulated--his lusts subdued and slain. He wanted the whole man set in such tone that he should not be forever falling before temptation. All these were blessings which he needed in the present life if ever--needed then--which moreover he prayed he might obtain then, and which he manifestly expected then.

2. Many are in the habit of using this language of prayer frequently without really apprehending what it means. Consequently their prayers obtain no particular answer. No man need expect a specific answer to prayer unless he prays for something specific and knows what it is. It is impossible that there should be intelligent desire for objects unless those objects are apprehended by the mind with considerable distinctness.

3. Many do not fulfill the conditions so as offer the prayer acceptably. They lack the requisite confidence in God. Not asking in faith, they can not receive, for their unbelief places it beyond the power of God to bless them without sacrificing his own honor.

4. We do not understand the recorded prayers of Scripture, nor the promises, until we are brought into a state of mind similar to that of the writer. Recurring to the case of David, I do not mean that none can understand his prayer in our text until they have committed David's sins; but I do mean that we must see ourselves to have committed some sins, and that we must be greatly humbled and deeply penitent as he was--be filled with utter self-loathing as was the case with him. Such a state of mind brings out the full and precious meaning of the promise; it unfolds it like a charm, in lustre and glory such as none but the humbled soul can possibly appreciate.

It is moreover quite essential that we should understand our liabilities to fall before temptation. Probably David, before his sin, was not aware of his great danger--did not know how powerful those occasions to sin actually were. He might have been entirely unaware that any circumstances could ever have involved him in such dreadful sin--first seduction and adultery; then betrayal and murder in their meanest form; who can believe that David, anterior to his sin, understood all his own fearful liabilities to such sins as these? What, therefore, must have been his amazement when these terrible tendencies and occasions of sin came to be developed! How did he then cry out in the deep anguish of his soul--"O my God, save me from myself! O my God, create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me." So must every Christian see himself in these dark, fearful aspects of his character, before his prayer will be, like David's, a prayer of deep agony of soul.

5. It is not uncommon for Christians to have a right will and of course be in this respect acceptable to God while yet their previous habits have been so bad as to subject them to continual struggles and warfare; the imagination taking its filthy course and rioting in its pollutions unless constantly held in check by the pressure of some great considerations. Now the thing needed by such persons is to see their dangers and liabilities, and then to throw themselves upon the saving strength of the Most High.

6. The unsanctified, involuntary states of mind are great enemies to the soul. These appetites are the "fleshly lusts" that war against the soul's peace and purity. If these were removed there would still remain the devil to war against; with them we have both Satan from without, and our unsubdued propensities and ungoverned imagination within.

Formerly it was supposed that these conflicts with appetite were a real warfare with inborn and inbred sin. I hold no such doctrine. These appetites are not themselves sin, but they are the occasions of sin--the means of temptation to sin, and hence are objects of dread and loathing to the Christian.

7. In proportion as these lusts are subdued, there will arise in the mind a sense of purity. I have said that the soul loathes these appetites and passions which become occasions of sin, and loathes itself on account of them and their vile associations. For the same reasons, when purified from these loathed abominations, there will ensue a sweet consciousness of being pure, such as can by no means exist prior to their subjugation and cleansing.

8. This rectification of the appetites, sensibilities and imagination, has been commonly called sanctification, because men have really supposed that these things were themselves sinful. If they really were so, then their rectification would be genuine sanctification. In popular language there seems to be no strong objection to their being so called now. Indeed the Bible, ever using popular language, speaks of sanctification as affecting "spirit, soul and body." "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly. And I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless"--as if blame might attach to either. The writer doubtless intends simply the sanctification of the whole man--in which state the body would no longer become the occasion of sin to the mind.

9. This blessing is exceedingly valuable and desirable. It is hardly possible to estimate adequately its great value. Let one experience what David did--have reason to loathe himself as he had; have occasion to know the dreadful power of those inward foes--those terrible snares to his soul;--let him see how his tyrant lusts have overpowered him and laid him prostrate and bleeding in the dust;--then may he see how greatly desirable it is to have even the hottest fires of providential discipline seize upon him and burn up all his tin and all his dross, till nothing remains but gold well purified. O how he will rejoice even through such a process to come forth redeemed, and cleansed, so that he may stand henceforth perfect and complete in all the will of God!

10. This blessing is indispensable to inward tranquility and peace of mind. In no farther than this entire work is advanced, can one enjoy repose in God. The will may be right; but the mind will almost continually experience those terrible agitations which result from conflict with unsubdued, ungoverned sensuality. There can be no abiding peace till the whole man is brought into harmony with God's service--with a holy will and a holy life.

11. Especially is this blessing greatly desirable as a condition of passing tranquilly through sore outward trials. When men have received this blessing, it seems to be the order of God's providence to test them, and cause them to exhibit great calmness, to the praise of victorious grace. Then observers will wonder

how they can pass so calmly and so sweetly through trials so fiery. As the three children in Daniel walked within the burning furnace, amid its hottest flames, and when they came forth no smell of fire had been on them, for the Son of God had been with them there--so when Christians have their lusts subdued and slain beforehand--so that Jesus can walk with them through the furnace, no fires can burn upon them from without, nor from within. All is calm and all is safe. Said a man once of a Christian sister who was under most distressing trials--"I wonder how she can live." But she was calm and quiet as a lamb. God can purify us so that we can pass through the most terrific trials unruffled as the air of a summer evening.

12. This state is greatly important to our highest usefulness. Men have been useful without this; but if they would be useful in the highest degree they must go to God imploring him to do all He sees they need. This is the very spirit in which we should apply to God for this blessing. "O my God, do all thy will in me; then put me in any position in the universe which will most fully illustrate and extol thy grace. No matter what it be, only let it greatly glorify thy name."

13. Until this work is done, Christians will, more or less frequently, be a great stumbling-block to the world, and indeed to all others. So was David. His heart was not thoroughly made pure; hence a constant liability to such dreadful sins as those into which he fell. Pres. Edwards made, and put on record this most excellent resolution;--"When I fall into any sins, I will not rest until I have searched out and found the occasion and have removed it." This great man had learned enough from his own experience to show him that he must look for the occasions of sin. When a patient is sick you would not attack the symptoms, but would look for the occasions or causes and would seek to remove them; so in the occurrence of sin, you must look for the occasions and give yourself no rest till they are thoroughly removed. Hence the fitness of this prayer made by the Psalmist--and hence the reason why you should go to God and cry, "O my God create in me a clean heart;--take away all these distressing occasions of sin, or I shall continue to dishonor thee and bring reproach on thy name."

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