

Sanctification by Faith

by Charles Finney

The gospel method of justification does not set aside the moral law, but rather establishes it by producing true obedience to it through faith.

Scripture: Romans 3:31, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Sanctification"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that justification by faith does not nullify the law but rather establishes it, as true obedience arises from faith in Christ. He argues that the gospel enforces moral law and that genuine repentance and faith lead to sanctification, which is the essence of holiness. Finney addresses common objections that faith might encourage sin, asserting that the gospel's message of grace compels believers to love and obey God. He illustrates that true obedience is born from understanding God's disinterested love and the free gift of salvation, which transforms the heart and motivates genuine moral action. Ultimately, Finney calls for a clear presentation of the gospel to lead sinners away from self-righteousness and towards faith in Christ.

Transcript

TEXT--"Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid; yea, we establish the law."--Romans iii. 31.

THE apostle had been proving that all mankind, both Jews and Gentiles, were in their sins, and refuting the doctrine so generally entertained by the Jews, that they were a holy people and saved by their works. He showed that justification can never be by works, but by faith. He then anticipates an objection, like this, "Are we to understand you as teaching that the law of God is abrogated and set aside by this plan of justification?" "By no means," says the apostle, "we rather establish the law." In treating of this subject, I design to pursue the following order:

- I. Show that the gospel method of justification does not set aside or repeal the law.
- II. That it rather establishes the law, by producing true obedience to it, and as the only means that does this.

The greatest objection to the doctrine of Justification by Faith has always been, that it is inconsistent with good morals, conniving at sin, and opening the flood-gates of iniquity. It has been said, that to maintain

that men are not to depend on their own good behavior for salvation, but are to be saved by faith in another, is calculated to make men regardless of good morals, and to encourage them to live in sin, depending on Christ to justify them. By others, it has been maintained that the gospel does in fact release from obligation to obey the moral law, so that a more lax morality is permitted under the gospel than was allowed under the law.

I. I am to show that the gospel method of justification does not set aside the moral law.

1. It cannot be that this method of justification sets aside the moral law, because the gospel everywhere enforces obedience to the law, and lays down the same standard of holiness.

Jesus Christ adopted the very words of the moral law, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself."

2. The conditions of the gospel are designed to sustain the moral law.

The gospel requires repentance, as the condition of salvation. What is repentance? The renunciation of sin. The man must repent of his breaches of the law of God, and return to obedience to the law. This is tantamount to a requirement of obedience.

3. The gospel maintains that the law is right.

If it did not maintain the law to its full extent, it might be said that Christ is the minister of sin.

4. By the gospel plan, the sanctions of the gospel are added to the sanctions of the law, to enforce obedience to the law.

The apostle says, "He that despised Moses' law, died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" Thus adding the awful sanctions of the gospel to those of the law, to enforce obedience to the precepts of the law.

II. I am to show that the doctrine of justification by faith produces sanctification, by producing the only true obedience to the law.

By this I mean, that when the mind understands this plan, and exercises faith in it, it naturally produces sanctification. Sanctification is holiness, and holiness is nothing but obedience to the law, consisting in love to God and love to man.

In support of the proposition that justification by faith produces true obedience to the law of God, my first position is, that sanctification never can be produced among selfish or wicked beings, by the law itself, separate from the considerations of the gospel, or the motives connected with justification by faith.

The motives of the law did not restrain those beings from committing sin, and it is absurd to suppose the same motives can reclaim them from sin, when they have fallen under the power of selfishness, and when sin is confirmed by habit. The motives of the law lose a great part of their influence, when a being is once fallen. They even exert an opposite influence. The motives of the law, as viewed by a selfish mind, have a tendency to cause sin to abound. This is the experience of every sinner. When he sees the spirituality of the law, and does not see the motives of the gospel, it raises the pride of his heart, and confirms him in his

rebellion. The case of the devil is an exhibition of what the law can do, with all its principles and sanctions, upon a wicked heart. He understands the law, sees its reasonableness, has experienced the blessedness of obedience, and knows full well that to return to obedience would restore his peace of mind. This he knows better than any sinner of our race, who never was holy, can know it, and yet it presents to his mind no such motives as reclaim him, but on the contrary, drive him to a returnless distance from obedience.

When obedience to the law is held forth to the sinner as the condition of life, immediately it sets him upon making self-righteous efforts. In almost every instance, the first effort of the awakened sinner is to obey the law. He thinks he must first make himself better, in some way, before he may embrace the gospel. He has no idea of the simplicity of the gospel plan of salvation by faith, offering eternal life as a mere gratuitous gift. Alarm the sinner with the penalty of the law, and he naturally, and by the very laws of his mind, sets himself to do better, to amend his life, and in some self-righteous manner obtain eternal life, under the influence of slavish fear. And the more the law presses him, the greater are his pharisaical efforts, while hope is left to him, that if he obeys he may be accepted. What else could you expect of him? He is purely selfish, and though he ought to submit at once to God, yet, as he does not understand the gospel terms of salvation, and his mind is of course first turned to the object of getting away from the danger of the penalty, he tries to get up to heaven some other way. I do not believe there is an instance in history, of a man who has submitted to God, until he has seen that salvation must be by faith, and that his own self-righteous strivings have no tendency to save him.

Again; if you undertake to produce holiness by legal motives, the very fear of failure has the effect to divert attention from the objects of love, from God and Christ. The sinner is all the while compassing Mount Sinai, and taking heed to his footsteps, to see how near he comes to obedience; and how can he get into the spirit of heaven?

Again; the penalty of the law has no tendency to produce love in the first instance. It may increase love in those who already have it, when they contemplate it as an exhibition of God's infinite holiness. The angels in heaven, and good men on earth, contemplate its propriety and fitness, and see in it the expression of the good will of God to his creatures, and it appears amiable and lovely, and increases their delight in God and their confidence towards him. But it is right the reverse with the selfish man. He sees the penalty hanging over his own head, and no way of escape, and it is not in mind to become enamored with the Being that holds the thunderbolt over his devoted head. From the nature of mind, he will flee from him, not to him. It seems never to have been dreamed of, by the inspired writers, that the law could sanctify men. The law is given rather to slay than to make alive, to cut off men's self-righteous hopes for ever, and compel them to flee to Christ.

Again; Sinners, under the naked law, and irrespective of the gospel--I say, sinners, naturally and necessarily, and of right, under such circumstances, view God as an irreconcilable enemy. They are wholly selfish; and apart from the considerations of the gospel, they view God just as the devil views him. No motive in the law can be exhibited to a selfish mind that will beget love. Can the influence of penalty do it?

A strange plan of reformation this, to send men to hell to reform them! Let him go on in sin and rebellion to the end of life, and then be punished till he becomes holy. I wonder the devil has not become holy! He has suffered long enough, he has been in hell these thousands of years, and he is no better than he was. The reason is, there is no gospel there, and no Holy Spirit there to apply the truth, and the penalty only confirms his rebellion.

Again: The doctrine of justification by faith can relieve these difficulties. It can produce and it has produced real obedience to the precept of the law. Justification by faith does not set aside the law as a rule of duty, but only sets aside the penalty of the law. And the preaching of justification as a mere gratuity, bestowed on the simple act of faith, is the only way in which obedience to the law is ever brought about. This I shall now show from the following considerations:

1. It relieves the mind from the pressure of those considerations that naturally tend to confirm selfishness.

While the mind is looking only at the law, it only feels the influence of hope and fear, perpetuating purely selfish efforts. But justification by faith annihilates this spirit of bondage. The apostle says, "We have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear." This plan of salvation begets love and gratitude to God, and leads the soul to taste the sweets of holiness.

2. It relieves the mind also from the necessity of making its own salvation its supreme object.

The believer in the gospel plan of salvation finds salvation, full and complete, including both sanctification and eternal life, already prepared; and instead of being driven to the life of a Pharisee in religion, of laborious and exhausting effort, he receives it as a free gift, a mere gratuity, and is now left free to exercise disinterested benevolence, and to live and labor for the salvation of others, leaving his own soul unreservedly to Christ.

3. The fact that God has provided and given him salvation as a gratuity, is calculated to awaken in the believer a concern for others, when he sees them dying for the want of this salvation, that they may be brought to the knowledge of the truth and be saved. How far from every selfish motive are those influences. It exhibits God, not as the law exhibits him, as an irreconcilable enemy, but as a grieved and offended father, willing to be reconciled, nay, very desirous that his subjects should become reconciled to him and live. This is calculated to beget love. It exhibits God as making the greatest sacrifice to reconcile sinners to himself; and from no other motive than a pure and disinterested regard to their happiness. Try this in your own family. The law represents God as armed with wrath, and determined to punish the sinner, without hope or help. The gospel represents him as offended, indeed, but yet so anxious they should return to him, that he has made the greatest conceivable sacrifices, out of pure disinterested love to his wandering children.

I once heard a father say, that he had tried in his family to imitate the government of God, and when his child did wrong he reasoned with him and showed him his faults; and when he was fully convinced and confounded and condemned, so that he had not a word to say, then the father asked him, Do you deserve to be punished? "Yes, sir." I know it, and now if I were to let you go, what influence would it have over the other children? Rather than do that, I will take the punishment myself. So he laid the ferule on himself, and it had the most astonishing effect on the mind of the child. He had never tried any thing so perfectly subduing to the mind as this. And from the laws of mind, it must be so. It affects the mind in a manner entirely different from the naked law.

4. It brings the mind under an entire new set of influences, and leaves it free to weigh the reasons for holiness, and decide accordingly.

Under the law, none but motives of hope and fear can operate on the sinner's mind. But under the gospel, the influence of hope and fear are set aside, and a new set of considerations presented, with a view of God's entire character, in all the attractions he can command. It gives the most heart-breaking

sin-subduing views of God. It presents him to the senses in human nature. It exhibits his disinterestedness. The way Satan prevailed against our first parents was by leading them to doubt God's disinterestedness. The gospel demonstrates the truth, and corrects this lie. The law represents God as the inexorable enemy of the sinner as securing happiness to all who perfectly obey, but thundering down wrath on all who disobey. The gospel reveals new features in God's character, not known before. Doubtless the gospel increases the love of all holy beings, and gives greater joy to the angels in heaven, greatly increasing their love and confidence and admiration, when they see God's amazing pity and forbearance towards the guilty. The law drove the devils to hell, and it drove Adam and Eve from Paradise. But when the blessed spirits see the same holy God waiting on rebels, nay, opening his own bosom and giving his beloved Son for them, and taking such unwearied pains for thousands of years to save sinners, do you think it has no influence in strengthening the motives in their minds to obedience and love?

The devil, who is a purely selfish being, is always accusing others of being selfish. He accused Job of this, "Doth Job fear God for naught?" He accused God to our first parents, of being selfish, and that the only reason for his forbidding them to eat of the tree of knowledge was the fear that they might come to know as much as himself. The gospel shows what God is. If he was selfish, he would not take such pains to save those whom he might with perfect ease crush to hell. Nothing is so calculated to make selfish persons ashamed of their selfishness, as to see disinterested benevolence in others. Hence the wicked are always trying to appear disinterested. Let the selfish individual, who has any heart, see true benevolence in others, and it is like coals of fire on his head. The wise man understood this, when he said, "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; and if he is thirsty, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head." Nothing is so calculated to cut down an enemy, and win him over, and make him a friend.

This is what the gospel does to sinners. It shows them, that notwithstanding all that they have done to God, God still exercises towards them disinterested love. When he sees God stooping from heaven to save him, and understands that it is indeed TRUE, O, how it melts and breaks down the heart, strikes a death blow to selfishness, and wins him over to unbounded confidence and holy love. God has so constituted the mind that it must necessarily do homage to virtue. It must do this, as long as it retains the powers of moral agency. This is as true in hell as in heaven. The devil feels this. When an individual sees that God has no interested motives to condemn him, when he sees that God offers salvation as a mere gratuity, through faith, he cannot but feel admiration of God's benevolence. His selfishness is crushed, the law has done its work, he sees that all his selfish endeavors have done no good; and the next step is for his heart to go out in disinterested love.

Suppose a man was under sentence of death for rebellion, and had tried many expedients to recommend himself to the government, but failed, because they were all hollow-hearted and selfish. He sees that the government understands his motives, and that he is not really reconciled. He knows himself that they were all hypocritical and selfish, moved by the hope of favor or the fear of wrath, and that the government is more and more incensed at his hypocrisy. Just now let a paper be brought to him from the government, offering him a free pardon on the simple condition that he would receive it as a mere gratuity, making no account of his own works--what influence will it have on his mind? The moment he finds the penalty set aside, and that he has no need to go to work by any self-righteous efforts, his mind is filled with admiration. Now, let it appear that the government has made the greatest sacrifices to procure this; his selfishness is slain, and he melts down like a child at his sovereign's feet, ready to obey the law because he loves his sovereign.

5. All true obedience turns on faith. It secures all the requisite influences to produce sanctification. It gives the doctrines of eternity access to the mind and a hold on the heart. In this world the motives of time are addressed to the senses. The motives that influence the spirits of the just in heaven do not reach us through the senses. But when faith is exercised, the wall is broken down, and the vast realities of eternity act on the mind here with the same kind of influence that they have in eternity. Mind is mind, every where. And were it not for the darkness of unbelief, men would live here just as they do in the eternal world. Sinners here would rage and blaspheme, just as they do in hell; and saints would love and obey and praise, just as they do in heaven. Now, faith makes all these things realities, it swings the mind loose from the clogs of the world, and he beholds God, and apprehends his law and his love. In no other way can these motives take hold on the mind. What a mighty action must it have on the mind, when it takes hold of the love of Christ! What a life-giving power, when the pure motives of the gospel crowd into the mind and stir it up with energy divine! Every Christian knows, that in proportion to the strength of his faith, his mind is buoyant and active, and when his faith flags, his soul is dark and listless. It is faith alone that places the things of time and eternity in their true comparison, and sets down the things of time and sense at their real value. It breaks up the delusions of the mind, the soul shakes itself from its errors and clogs, and it rises up in communion with God.

REMARKS.

I. It is as unphilosophical as it is unscriptural to attempt to convert and sanctify the minds of sinners without the motives of the gospel.

You may press the sinner with the law, and make him see his own character, the greatness and justice of God, and his ruined condition. But hide the motives of the gospel from his mind, and it is all in vain.

II. It is absurd to think that the offers of the gospel are calculated to beget a selfish hope.

Some are afraid to throw out upon the sinner's mind all the character of God; and they try to make him submit to God, by casting him down in despair. This is not only against the gospel, but it is absurd in itself. It is absurd to think that, in order to destroy the selfishness of a sinner, you must hide from him the knowledge of how much God loves and pities him, and how great sacrifices he has made to save him.

III. So far is it from being true, that sinners are in danger of getting false hopes if they are allowed to know the real compassion of God, while you hide this, it is impossible to give him any other than a false hope. Withholding from the sinner who is writhing under conviction, the fact that God has provided salvation as a mere gratuity, is the very way to confirm his selfishness; and if he gets any hope, it must be a false one. To press him to submission by the law alone, is to set him to build a self-righteous foundation.

IV. So far as we can see, salvation by grace, not bestowed in any degree for our own works, is the only possible way of reclaiming selfish beings.

Suppose salvation was not altogether gratuitous, but that some degree of good works was taken into the account, and for those good works in part we were justified--just so far as this consideration is in the mind, just so far there is a stimulus to selfishness. You must bring the sinner to see that he is entirely dependent on free grace, and that a full and complete justification is bestowed, on the first act of faith, as a mere gratuity, and no part of it as an equivalent for any thing he is to do. This alone dissolves the influence of selfishness, and secures holy action.

V. If all this is true, sinners should be put in the fullest possible possession, and in the speediest manner, of the whole plan of salvation.

They should be made to see the law, and their own guilt, and that they have no way to save themselves; and then, the more fully the whole length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God should be opened, the more effectually will you crush his selfishness, and subdue his soul in love to God. Do not be afraid, in conversing with sinners, to show the whole plan of salvation, and give the fullest possible exhibition of the infinite compassion of God. Show him that, notwithstanding his guilt, the Son of God is knocking at the door and beseeching him to be reconciled to God.

VI. You see why so many convicted sinners continue so long compassing Mount Sinai, with self-righteous efforts to save themselves by their own works.

How often you find sinners trying to get more feeling, or waiting till they have made more prayers and made greater efforts, and expecting to recommend themselves to God in this way. Why is all this? The sinner needs to be driven off from this, and made to see that he is all the while looking for salvation under the law. He must be made to see that all this is superseded by the gospel offering him all he wants as a mere gratuity. He must hear Jesus, saying, "Ye will not come unto me that ye may have life: O, no, you are willing to pray, and go to meeting, and read the Bible, or any thing, but come unto me. Sinner, this is the road; I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father but by me. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the light of the world. Here, sinner, is what you want. Instead of trying your self-righteous prayers and efforts, here is what you are looking for, only believe and you shall be saved."

VII. You see why so many professors of religion are always in the dark.

They are looking at their sins, confining their observations to themselves, and losing sight of the fact, that they have only to take right hold of Jesus Christ and throw themselves upon him, and all is well.

VIII. The law is useful to convict men; but, as a matter of fact, it never breaks the heart. The gospel alone does that. The degree in which a convert is broken hearted, is in proportion to the degree of clearness with which he apprehends the gospel.

IX. Converts, if you call them so, who entertain a hope under legal preaching, may have an intellectual approbation of the law, and a sort of dry zeal, but never make mellow, broken hearted Christians. If they have not seen God in the attitude in which he is exhibited in the gospel, they are not such Christians as you will see sometimes, with the tear trembling in their eye, and their frames shaking with emotion, at the name of Jesus.

X. You see what needs to be done with sinners who are under conviction, and what with those professors who are in darkness. They must be led right to Christ, and made to take hold of the plan of salvation by faith. It is in vain to expect to do them good in any other way.

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