

Self Deceivers

by Charles Finney

True faith must be practical and lead to good works, and self-deception occurs when one's faith does not result in obedience to God's word.

Scripture: Romans 6:4, Romans 13:14, Galatians 6:14, Ephesians 4:22, Colossians 2:15, Colossians 3:3, Colossians 3:9, James 1:22

Topics: "New Creation", "Sanctification"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher delves into the concept of 'laid aside' (apekduomai) in the Bible, emphasizing the complete separation and stripping off of the old self like dirty garments, highlighting the believer's new identity in Christ and the power to live out this new life. The preacher explains that believers have died with Christ, freeing them from the dominion of sin and the old sinful nature, and now have the ability to walk in newness of life. The sermon underscores the importance of applying the truth of being a new creation in Christ by putting off the old self and putting on the new self, living in accordance with their new identity.

Transcript

Text--But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.-- James 1:22.

THERE are two extremes in religion, equally false and equally fatal. And there are two classes of hypocrites that occupy these two extremes. The first class make religion consist altogether in the belief of certain abstract doctrines, or what they call faith, and lay little or no stress on good works. The other class make religion to consist altogether in good works, (I mean dead works,) and lay little or no stress on faith in Jesus Christ, but hope for salvation by their own deeds. The Jews belonged generally to the last mentioned class. Their religious teachers taught them that they would be saved by obedience to the ceremonial law. And therefore, when Paul began to preach, he seems to have attacked more especially this error of the Jews. He was determined to carry the main question, that men are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, in opposition to the doctrine of the Scribes and Pharisees, that salvation is by obedience to law. And he pressed this point so earnestly, in his preaching and in his epistles, that he carried it, and settled the faith of the church in the great doctrine of justification by faith. And then certain individuals in the church laid hold of this doctrine and carried it to the opposite extreme, and maintained that men are saved by faith altogether, irrespective of works of any kind. They overlooked the plain principle, that genuine faith always results in good works, and is itself a good work.

I said that these two extremes, that which makes religion consist altogether in outward works and that which makes it consist altogether in faith, are equally false and equally fatal. Those who make religion consist altogether in good works, overlook the fact that works themselves are not acceptable to God, unless they proceed from faith. For without faith it is impossible to please him. And those who make religion consist altogether in faith, overlook the fact, that true faith always works by love, and invariably produces the works of love.

They are equally fatal, because, on the one hand, without faith they cannot be pardoned or justified; and on the other, without sanctification they cannot be fitted either for the employments and enjoyments of Heaven. Let a sinner turn from his sins altogether, and suppose his works to be as perfect as he thinks them to be, and yet he could not be pardoned, without faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ. And so if any one supposed he could be justified by faith while his works were evil, he ought to know that without sanctification his faith is but dead and cannot even be the instrument of his justification.

It appears that the apostle James designed in this epistle to put this matter upon the right ground, and show exactly where the truth lay, and to explain the necessity and the reason of the necessity of both faith and good works. This epistle is a very practical one, and it meets full in the face all the great practical questions of the day, and decides them.

Doctrines in religion are of two classes, those which refer to God, and those which refer to human practice. Many confine their idea of religious doctrines to the former class. They think nothing is properly called doctrine but what respects God, his attributes, mode of existence, decrees, and so on.--When I gave notice that I should commence a course of PRACTICAL LECTURES, I hope you did not understand me to mean that the lectures would not be doctrinal, or would have no doctrine in them. My design is to preach, if the Lord will, a course of lectures on practical doctrines.

The doctrine which I propose to consider to night is this.

THAT PROFESSOR OF RELIGION WHO DOES NOT PRACTICE WHAT HE ADMITS TO BE TRUE, IS SELF-DECEIVED.

There are two classes of hypocrites among professors of religion--those that deceive others and those that deceive themselves. One class of hypocrites are those that, under a specious outside of morality and show of religion, cover up the enmity of their hearts against God, and lead others to think they are very pious people. Thus the Pharisees obtained the reputation of being remarkably pious, by their outside show of religion, their alms and their long prayers. The other class is that referred to in the text, who do not deceive others but themselves. These are orthodox in sentiment but loose in practice. They seem to suppose religion to consist in a parcel of notions, without regard to practice, and thus deceive themselves to think they are good Christians while destitute of true holiness. They are hearers of the word but not doers. They love orthodox preaching, and take great pleasure in hearing the abstract doctrines of religion exhibited, and perhaps have flights of imagination and glowing feelings in view of the character and government of God, but they are not careful to practice the precepts of God's word, nor are they pleased with the preaching of those doctrines which relate to human practice.

Perhaps there are some present to-night of both these classes of hypocrites. Now, mark: I am not going to preach tonight to those of you who, by great strictness of morals and outside show of religion, deceive others. I address now those of you who do not practice what you know to be true--who are hearers and not doers. Perhaps I had better say, to secure attention, that it is highly probable there are a number here

now, of this character. I do not know your names, but I wish you to understand that if you are that character, you are the persons I am speaking to, just as if I called out your names. I mean you. You hear the word and believe it in theory, while you deny it in practice. I say to you that YOU DECEIVE YOURSELVES. The text proves it. Here you have an express "Thus saith the Lord" for it, that all such characters are self-deceivers. I might quote a number of other passages of scripture, that are to the point, and there leave it. But I wish to call your attention to some other considerations, besides the direct scripture testimony.

In the first place, you do not truly believe the word. You hear it, and admit it to be true, but you do not truly believe it. And here let me say, that persons are themselves liable to deception on this point. Not that their consciousness deceives them, but they do not understand what it is that consciousness testifies. Two things are indispensable to evangelical or saving faith. The first is intellectual conviction of the truth of a thing. And here I do not mean merely the abstract truth of it, but in its bearing on you. The truth, in its relation to you, or its bearing on your conduct, must be received intellectually. And then true faith includes a corresponding state of heart. This always enters into the essence of true faith. When a man's understanding is convinced, and he admits the truth in its relation to himself, then there must be a hearty approbation of it in its bearing or relation to himself. Both these states of mind are indispensable to true faith. Intellectual conviction of the truth is not saving faith. But intellectual conviction, when accompanied with a corresponding state of the affections, is saving faith. Hence it follows that where there is true saving faith, there is always corresponding conduct. The conduct always follows the real faith. Just as certain as the will controls the conduct, men will act as they believe. Suppose I say to a man, Do you believe this? "Yes, I believe it." What does he mean? A mere intellectual conviction? He may have that, and yet not have faith.

A man may even feel an approbation of an abstract truth. This is what many persons suppose to be faith, the approbation which they feel for the character and government of God, and for the plan of salvation, when viewed abstractedly. Many persons, when they hear an eloquent sermon on the attributes or government of God, are set all in a glow at the sublimity and excellency displayed, when they have not a particle of true faith. I have heard of an infidel who would be moved even to ecstasy at such themes. The rational mind is so constituted that it naturally and necessarily approves of truth when viewed abstractedly. The wickedest devils in hell love it, if they can see it without its relation to themselves. If they could see the gospel without any relation that interferes with their own selfishness, they would not only see it to be true, but would heartily approve it. All hell, if they could view God in his absolute existence, without any relation to themselves, would heartily approve of his character. The reason why wicked men and devils hate God, is because they see him in relation to themselves. Their hearts rise up in rebellion, because they see him opposed to their selfishness.

Here is the source of a grand delusion among men in regard to religion. They see it to be true, and they really rejoice in contemplating it: they do not enter into its relations to themselves, and so they love to hear such preaching, and say they are fed by it. But, MARK:--They go away and do not practice! See that man. He is sick, and his feelings are tender. In view of Christ as a kind and tender Savior, his heart melts, and he feels strong emotions of approbation towards Jesus Christ. Why? For the very same reasons that he would feel strong emotions towards the hero of a romance. But he does not obey Christ. He never practices one thing out of obedience to Christ, but just views him abstractedly, and is delighted with his glorious and lovely character, while he himself remains in the gall of bitterness. Thus it is apparent that your faith must be an efficient faith, such as regulates your practice and produces good works, or it is not

the faith of the gospel, it is no real faith at all.

Again: It is further manifest that you are deceiving yourselves, because all true religion consists in obedience. And, therefore, however much you may approve of Christianity, you have no religion unless you obey it. In saying that all religion consists in obedience, I do not mean outward obedience. But faith itself, true faith, works by love, and produces corresponding action. There is no real obedience but the obedience of the heart: love is the fulfilling of the law; and religion consists in the obedience of the heart, with a corresponding course of life. The man, therefore, who hears the truth, and approves it, and does not practice it, deceiveth himself. He is like the man beholding his natural face in a glass; for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.

Again: That state of mind which you mistake for religion, an intellectual conviction of truth, and approval of it in the abstract, so far from being evidence that you are pious, is as common to the wicked as to the good, whenever they can be brought to look at it abstractedly. This is the reason why it is often so difficult to convince sinners that they are opposed to God and his truth. Men are so constituted that they do approve of virtue, and do admire the character and government of God, and would approve and admire every truth in the Bible, if they could view it abstractedly, and without any relation to themselves. And when they sit under preaching that holds up the truth in such a way, that it has not much of a practical bearing on themselves, they may sit for years and never consider that they are opposed to God and to his government.

And I am more and more persuaded, that great multitudes are to be found in all our congregations, where the abstract doctrines of the gospel are much preached, who like the preaching and like to hear about God, and all these things, and yet are unconverted. And no doubt multitudes of them get into the churches, because they love orthodox preaching, when after all it is manifest that they are not doers of the word. And here is the difficulty: they have not had that searching preaching that made them see the truth in its bearing on themselves. And now they are in the church, whenever the truth is preached in its practical relation to them, they show the enmity of their hearts unchanged, by rising up in opposition to truth.

They took it for granted that they were Christians, and so joined the church, because they could hear sound doctrinal preaching and approve of it, or because they read the Bible and approved of it. If their faith be not so practical as to influence their conduct, if they do not view the truth in its relation to their own practice, their faith does not affect them so much as the FAITH OF THE DEVIL.

REMARKS

1. Great injury has been done by false representations regarding the wickedness of real Christians.

A celebrated preacher, not long since, is said to have given this definition of a Christian--"A little grace and a great deal of devil." I utterly deny this definition. It is false and ruinous. A great deal is said that makes an impression that real Christians are the wickedest beings on the face of the earth. It is true that when they do sin they incur great guilt. For a Christian to sin is highly criminal. And it is also true that enlightened Christians see in their sins great wickedness. When they compare their obligations with their lives, they are greatly humbled, and express their humility in very strong language. But it is not true that they are as bad as the devil, or any where in the neighborhood of it. This is perfectly demonstrable. When they do sin, their sins have great aggravation, and appear extremely wicked in the sight of God. But to suppose that men are real Christians while they live in the service of the devil, and have little of even the appearance of

religion, is a sentiment that is not only false but of very dangerous tendency. It is calculated to encourage all that class of hypocrites who are Antinomians, and to encourage backsliders, as well as to do a great injury to the cause of Christ in the estimation of scorners. The truth is, those who do not obey God are not Christians. The contrary doctrine is ruinous to the churches, by filling them up with multitudes whose claim to piety depends on their adoption of certain notions, while they never heartily intended to obey the requirements of the gospel in their lives.

2. Those who are so much more zealous for doctrines than for practice, and who lay much more stress on that class of doctrines which relate to God than on that class which relate to their own conduct, are Antinomians.

There are many who will receive that class of the doctrines of the Bible that relate to God, and approve and love them, who have not a particle of religion. Those who are never "fed," as they call it, on any preaching but that of certain abstract points of doctrine, are Antinomians. They are the very persons against whom the apostle James wrote this epistle. They make religion to consist in a set of notions, while they do not lead holy lives.

3. That class of professors of religion, who never like to hear about God or his attributes, or mode of existence, the Trinity, decrees, election, and the like, but lay all stress on religious practice to the exclusion of religious doctrine, are Pharisees.

They make great pretensions to outward piety, and perhaps to inward flights of emotion of a certain poetical cast, while they will not receive the great truths that relate to God, but deny the fundamental doctrines of the gospel.

4. The proper end and tendency of all right doctrine, when truly believed, is to produce correct practice.

Wherever you find a man's practice heretical, you may be sure his belief is heretical too. The faith that he holds in his heart is just as heretical as his life. He may not be heretical in his notions and theories. He may be right there, even on the very points where he is heretical in practice. But he does not really believe it.

For illustration: See that careless sinner, there, grasping wealth and rushing headlong in the search for riches. Does that man truly believe he is ever going to die? Perhaps you will say, he knows he must die. But I say, that while he is in this attitude, he does not actually believe he is ever going to die. It is not before his thoughts at all. It is therefore impossible that he should believe it in his utter thoughtlessness. You ask him if he expects ever to die, and he will reply, "O yes, I know I must die, all men are mortal." As soon as he turns his thoughts to it, he assents to the truth. And if you could fasten the conviction on his mind till he is really and permanently impressed with it, he would infallibly change his conduct, and live for another world instead of this. It is just so in religion; whatever a man really believes, is just as certain to control his practice as that the will governs the conduct.

5. The church has for a long time acted too much on the Antinomial policy.

She has been sticklish for the more abstract doctrines, and left the more practical too much out of view. She has laid greater stress on orthodoxy in those doctrines that are not practical, than in those that are practical. Look at the creeds of the church, and see how they all lay the main stress on those doctrines that have little relation to our practice. A man may be the greatest heretic on points of practice, provided

he is not openly profane or vicious, and yet maintain a good standing in the church, whether his life corresponds with the gospel or not. Is not this monstrous? And hence we see, that when it is attempted to purify the church in regard to practical errors, she cannot bear it. --Why else is it that so much excitement is produced by attempting to clear the church from participation in the sins of intemperance, and Sabbath-breaking, and slavery? Why is it so difficult to induce the church to do any thing effectual for the conversion of the world? O, when shall the church be purified or the world converted? Not till it is a settled point, that heresy in practice is the proof of heresy in belief. Not while a man may deny the whole gospel in his practice every day, and yet maintain his standing in the church as a good Christian.

6. See how a minister may be deceived in regard to the state of his congregation.

He preaches a good deal on the abstract doctrines, that do not immediately relate to practice, and his people say they are fed, and rejoice in it, and he thinks they are growing in grace, when in fact it is no certain sign that there is any religion among them. It is manifest that this is not certain evidence. But if when he preaches practical doctrines, his people show that they love the truth in its relation to themselves, and show it by practicing it, then they give evidence of real love to the truth.

If a minister finds that his people love abstract doctrinal preaching, but that when he comes to press the practical doctrines they rebel, he may be sure that if they have any religion it is in a low state; and if he finds on fair trial that he can not bring them up to it, so as to receive practical doctrine, he may be satisfied they have not a particle of religion, but are a mere company of Antinomians, who think they can go to heaven on a dead faith in abstract orthodoxy.

[#7. is skipped in the original, a numbering error.--Ed.]

8. See what a vast multitude of professors of religion there are, who are deceiving themselves.

Many suppose they are Christians from the emotions they feel in view of truth, when in fact what they receive is truth presented to their minds in such a way that they do not see its bearing on themselves. If you bring the truth so to bear on them, as to destroy their pride and cut them off from their worldliness, such professors resist it. Look abroad upon the church. See what a multitude of orthodox churches and orthodox Christians live and feed upon the abstract doctrines of religion from year to year. Then look farther at their lives and see how little influence their professed belief has upon their practice. Have they saving faith? It cannot be. I do not mean to say that none of these church members are pious, but I do say that those who do not adopt in practice what they admit in theory--who are hearers of the word but not doers, deceive themselves.

Inquire now how many of you really believe the truths you hear preached. I have proposed to preach a course of practical lectures. I do not mean that I shall preach lectures that have no doctrine in them. That is not preaching at all. But what I desire is to see whether you will, as a church, do what you believe to be true. If I do not succeed in convincing you that any doctrine I may maintain is really true, that is another affair. That is reason enough why you should not do it. But if I do succeed in proving from the scriptures and convincing your understanding that it is true, and yet you do not practice it, I shall then have the evidence before my own eyes what your character is, and no longer deceive myself with the idea that this is a Christian church.

Are you conscious that the gospel is producing a practical effect upon you, according to your advancement in knowledge? Is it weaning you from the world? Do you find this to be your experience, that

when you receive any practical truth into your minds you love it, and love to feel its application to yourself, and take pleasure in practicing it? If you are not growing in grace, becoming more and more holy, YIELDING YOURSELVES UP to the influence of the gospel, you are deceiving yourselves.--How is it now with you who are elders of this church? How is it with you who are heads of families--all of you? When you hear a sermon, do you seize hold of it and take it home to you, and practice it; or do you receive it in your minds, and approve of it and never practice it? Woe to that man who admits the truth, and yet turns away and does not practice it, like the man beholding his natural face in a glass turning away and forgetting what manner of man he was.

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