

The Benevolence of God

by Charles Finney

God's love means that He is benevolent and devoted to doing good, and that He will always do what is good and prevent all evil that He can wisely prevent.

Scripture: Psalm 136:1, Psalm 145:9, Isaiah 54:10, Jeremiah 29:11, Lamentations 3:22-23, Matthew 7:11, John 3:16, Romans 8:28, 1 Peter 5:7, 1 John 4:16

Topics: "God's Love", "Divine Benevolence"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the profound truth that 'God is love,' explaining that this means God is fundamentally benevolent and devoted to the highest good of all beings. He outlines the implications of this truth, asserting that God's actions are always aligned with His benevolent nature, and He never acts contrary to the ultimate good of creation. Finney argues that God's love is not merely an emotion but a constant, unchanging disposition that governs all His actions, ensuring that He does everything possible to promote the happiness and well-being of His creatures. He also addresses the existence of evil and suffering, explaining that they are incidental to God's benevolent plan, which ultimately results in greater good than harm. The sermon concludes with a call to recognize God's love in all circumstances and to trust in His benevolent intentions.

Transcript

"God is love."--1 John 4:16.

It is not my intention, in commenting upon these words, to prove them to be true, for I should consider myself poorly employed in attempting to prove the truth of any passage of Scripture. It is not so much the business of the minister of the gospel to defend the truths of the Bible, as it is to expound and illustrate them, as he finds them revealed, and to show their bearing on the relations and responsibilities of men. It would be easy for me to advance many arguments, drawn from the whole range of the created universe, to show that 'God is love;' but this I shall not do at this time. I shall merely.

I. SHOW WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE TEXT.

II. STATE SOME THINGS WHICH MUST BE TRUE IF 'GOD IS LOVE.'

I. What is the meaning of the words of the text.

1. By the assertion that 'God is love,' I do not understand the Apostle to teach that the nature, that is, the essence or substance of God is love, for this would be an absurd proposition--nor that God is love in the sense of fondness for his creatures: that is, that his love is merely an emotion, belonging rather to the sensibility, than to the voluntary faculty of his mind.

2. I do understand the text as teaching that God is benevolent--supremely devoted to doing good--that all his powers are consecrated to the promotion of the highest good of sentient being. The Apostle, by the strong language of the text, surely does not mean to affirm that the nature or substance of God is love, but that his character or voluntary state is benevolent, and that it is infinitely so, that benevolence constitutes the whole disposition or state of his will, and that his character is constantly and eternally benevolent--not benevolent at one time, and selfish at another, but forever, and without change benevolent. But not to dwell on this division of the subject, I shall,

II. State some things which must be true if 'God is love.'

1. If it is true that 'God is love,' it follows that He has been eternally so, else his character is mutable, which is impossible.

2. If 'God is love,' He has but one intention or subjective motive for his conduct; that is, He aims at but one thing--consequently, his character is simple. In other words, if his ultimate end in acting is a benevolent one, it necessarily follows, that He always acts in view of one great consideration, which is, the promotion of the objects of benevolence, or the good of universal being.

3. If 'God is love,' He never has done, and never will do any thing, but in execution of his benevolent intention. There is a difference between the benevolence, and the executive volitions of God. His benevolence is one thing, and the action which He puts forth in execution of his benevolence, is another. God was benevolent from eternity, but He has not acted in execution of his benevolent designs from eternity--He has not eternally put forth creative power, for if He had done so, there would be created things as old as Himself, which is impossible. As just remarked, the will of God has forever been in a benevolent state; the developing, or acting out of that benevolence, is his actions or doings. Now, I say, that He never has done, and never will do, any thing which will not tend to realize the objects of his benevolence, or to accomplish that on which his heart is set. In other words, all the actions of God have been, and will continue to be, in execution of his grand design, which is, the promotion of the highest good of being.

4. If 'God is love,' it follows, that while He remains benevolent, He can do nothing but in execution of a benevolent intention. He will only do what necessarily results from such a state of mind. Every man knows from his own consciousness that this must be true. Action is caused by design or intention; therefore, it can never be inconsistent with intention. If I design to go directly home, I cannot go in an opposite direction, or loiter by the way. I can relinquish my intention, but so long as the design continues, I must act in obedience to that design. Now, while God remains benevolent, He can only act in obedience to a benevolent design--He must act in execution of a benevolent purpose. As He is a free agent, He can, of course, cease to be benevolent: but while He remains benevolent, He cannot cease to act benevolently.

5. If 'God is love,' it follows that He has omitted nothing, and can omit nothing, the performance of which, would, upon the whole, result in the highest good of being. God is infinitely wise. He can, therefore, make no mistakes. Good men being benevolent, cannot act inconsistently with a benevolent design; but having finite intellects, they may make mistakes and err in the path of duty. While intending the highest good of the universe, they may be mistaken as to the means for promoting this end, and so accomplish only

mischievous by their actions. But not so with God. His infinite wisdom permits Him to make no mistakes. While He remains benevolent, He will, and can do nothing inconsistent with his grand design. Hence it follows, that He never has, that He never will, and that while He remains benevolent, He never can, omit to do any thing which would conduce to the highest good of being--it is naturally impossible for Him to do so. He must cease to be benevolent, or else He can do nothing inconsistent with the highest good of being, or leave undone any thing which universal good requires.

6. If 'God is love,' He has suffered, and will suffer nothing to occur that would be injurious to the universe, that can be prevented by the attributes of Jehovah. This ought to be perfectly understood. I say, then, that if almighty power, under the control of infinite wisdom, and infinite love, can prevent the existence of any thing which will harm the universe, it will, of course, do so. If God is love, it follows as a self evident truth, that He has prevented, and will prevent, so far as He wisely can, the existence of every thing which would work ultimate injury to being.

7. God, being love, has created the universe in obedience to the law of benevolence; for his creative acts result from his benevolence--they are only effects of the benevolent state of his heart. Hence--

8. He created the universe as early as He wisely could. It would have been a natural impossibility for Him to create from eternity, for then his creatures would have been as old as Himself. But He did put forth creative power as soon as He benevolently could, taking into the account his own character and designs, and the prospective character of those whom He was to create. And,

9. He created the universe as rapidly as He could, consistently with his benevolent design. Not only did He begin his work as early as He wisely could, but when commenced, He carried it on as rapidly as benevolence would permit.

10. If 'God is love,' He has created as many worlds as benevolence demanded. He has omitted to create none, and has made no more and no less than the law of benevolence required.

11. He has created just such orders of beings, and endowed them with just such capacities as his infinite wisdom saw to be consistent with the accomplishment of his benevolent designs.

12. If 'God is love,' He has done, and will do, as much to promote the happiness of his creatures as He possibly can. Had He done, or should He do, more or less for the happiness of his subjects, than He has done, and will do, He could not be a benevolent being--He would become a wicked one. But being love, no one can accuse Him of neglecting his duty to his creatures. Hence--

13. He has done, and will do, as much to prevent the misery of his subjects, as the good of being will allow. This follows of course, if He is a benevolent being, or a 'God of love.' Many persons seem jealous, if any limit is put to the power of God; while they manifest little concern, whether or not his moral attributes, his justice and benevolence are limited. They seem to think that God might, if He pleased, prevent all misery, regardless of its cause. Now this is a false notion, for if God is a benevolent being, it would have been a natural impossibility for Him not to have done all that He could consistently do to prevent the misery of his creatures. It was, and is, impossible for Him not to do this, and remain a God of benevolence, a God of love. If He had fallen short of it, He would not have been benevolent at all. How can a man be benevolent and not do all the good he can? What is benevolence, but willing to accomplish all the good that lies in our power?

14. If 'God is love,' He has done, and will do, all that He can to prevent the sins of moral beings. He never has suffered a sin to be committed, which He could wisely or benevolently prevent--which He could prevent without sinning Himself. Do you think this a strange assertion? But is it not true? And is it not better that God should suffer some one else to sin, rather than sin Himself? Moreover, God has never suffered any thing inconsistent with the perfect holiness of his subjects, to exist, which He could wisely prevent. He has never allowed any temptation to draw his creatures from the path of duty, which He could prevent without an infraction of the law of benevolence. Now is not this self evident? If God is love, is it not certain that no sin or temptation ever existed which He could wisely prevent? Under existing circumstances, if God had done more than He has done to prevent sin, He would have sinned Himself. This is self evident; for if God is a benevolent being, He never could have omitted any exertion to prevent sin, which would be consistent with the good of the universe. Therefore, if He had done more than He has done to prevent it, He would no longer be a sinless being.

15. God is love; and therefore, He has made every sacrifice on his part, which He could benevolently make, for the promotion of the highest good of being. 'Herein is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.' Yes, God did not even hesitate to give his Son, his only Son, to die for us. He had no daughters, no other children, but one only Son. You who are parents, know how strongly a father becomes attached to an only child; while, if he has several children, he does not concentrate his affections with so great intensity upon any one of them. But if he has an only child, he prizes it as his greatest earthly treasure; he will see his property swept away, his buildings torn down, and all his earthly goods destroyed, before he will consent to give up his darling child. Now observe. God did not hesitate to give up his only Son to be a ransom for many; and after He has gone so far, will He not be ready to make any reasonable sacrifice for the good of his creatures? I tell you, yea. If it would be wise, He would willingly send his Son to earth, to die for us every year. He would Himself die a thousand times, if it were possible, and benevolence demanded it. When He sees that a sacrifice on his part, however great, will be the less of two evils, He will not hesitate to make it.

16. If 'God is love,' He has created all things as well as He possibly could. The question is often agitated--how could God have made such and such a thing, and why did He make it just as He did? Now observe. If God is love, He has done the best He could in the creation of the universe. He has established the best relations and founded the best laws which He possibly could have made, for the government of his creatures. We have a beautiful illustration of this truth in our own persons. God made us in the very best way; and if we are ever disposed to find fault with our physical or mental construction--if we will only examine ourselves, we shall be compelled to grant that God has done his best in our creation, and has placed all our organs and faculties in just the right place. And if we look away from ourselves, we shall see, that in giving laws to the universe, in directing all its movements, in ordering the succession of seasons, of day and night, God has done as wisely and well as He possibly could. He does not half do his work, nor does He do it slothfully; whatever He sets Himself about, He does in the best possible manner.

17. God has governed the universe as well as He possibly could. Not only has He created moral beings well, but He has governed them well. Not a single hour, since He first put forth creative power, has He ceased to control the universe in the best possible manner.

18. It does not follow from the fact that God is love, that there will not be great, but incidental evil always existing in the universe. Where there is sin, there must of necessity be misery; and there are also many natural evils, which are consequent on the arrangement of the universe, but this misery, and these evils, do not invalidate, nor are they inconsistent with the character of God; they are only incidental evils,

resulting from the accomplishment of his great plans of benevolence--the plans, in pursuance of which, He created the universe, and affixed to it laws for the regulation of its movements. I say that certain incidental evils have resulted from the creation of the universe, which God made in the best possible manner. But mark. They are only incidental to a benevolent plan. It does not follow, then, that because God is love, great and incidental evils may not exist in the universe, nor that they will not exist through eternity, nor that new forms of evil, unknown to us, but known to God, will not make their appearance. But,

19. It does follow from the fact that God is love, that as a whole, creation will result in greater good than evil. God was infinitely wise from the beginning. Now had He seen that creation would result in more evil than good, He could not have ordered it; therefore, we may be certain, that the evil will never equal the good which will result from creation, but that it will fall indefinitely short of it.

20. It is also certain, that a majority of his creatures will be happy--that the number of those who are happy, will greatly overbalance the number of those who are miserable.

21. It is not at all probable that the majority of the inhabitants of any world, except the place of torment, will be finally miserable. I say that it is unreasonable, to suppose that more evil than good will result to any world, where God has placed moral beings on trial. If it was not true, that in every world which God has created, the amount of good resulting, will equal or exceed the amount of evil, how, I ask, could God be a benevolent being, and what tokens of his benevolence could we have in such a creation.

22. If 'God is love,' it follows that He abhors whatever is inconsistent with the highest good of being. He of course abhors all sin, and all sinners, and is opposed to all the selfishness in the universe, and to whatever is forbidden by his law. If He is benevolent, He is manifestly sincere when He commands his subjects to be holy; and He commands this, with all his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. As a necessity of his character, He is better pleased with holiness than with sin.

23. It follows that He will exercise any degree of needed severity on rebels against his law. He will not hesitate to execute vengeance on the doers of iniquity. We have myriads of instances in this world, of the sternness with which God carries out the principles of His government. How often are men and families, yea, even nations, overwhelmed and crushed beneath the mighty wheels of this vast machine--with such firmness does God carry out his benevolent plans. His government of the universe will go on, and whoever stands in the way of it, will be ground to powder, no matter whether he be an angel from heaven, or a fiend from hell. So too, in the moral world. If an individual will throw himself in the way of the execution of God's plans, He is sure to let him fall, though he is a great and mighty king of Israel, though his fall will be the occasion of dire ruin to the church and the world. Yes, God could and did let even David fall. It was better that He should suffer the King of Israel to fall and the tale of his crime be told from Dan to Beersheba, through heaven and through hell,--I say it was better that he should let the wheels roll over and crush his chosen king, rather than that the car of his moral government should be for a moment stopped. And what God did to David, He does in a thousand other instances in the administration of his moral government. Yes, He will let Peter even deny his master, and the whole church apostatize from the true faith, rather than alter the plans of his moral government--and the reason why He does this, is because He is infinitely benevolent--because He is firm in the execution of His wise plans, and because He is moving on the great concerns of his government on a vast scale. God will not shrink from sending the wicked to hell, any more than from taking the righteous to heaven, for both acts are parts of the same great plan. It is indispensable to his peace of mind that He should do this. I repeat, that God could never be satisfied with His own conduct, if He did not send the wicked to hell, as well as take the righteous to heaven. Both acts result

from the same great principle of love to being--a principle, which seated in the breast of God, like an infinite volcano, bursts forth on every side--on the one hand scattering death and damnation among the inhabitants of hell, and on the other, casting the smiles of love over the dwellers in heaven. Yes, it is the same thing heaving up from the very depths of Infinite mind. It is the carrying out of the same benevolent design, which on the one hand consigns the wicked to hell, and on the other, takes the righteous to heaven.

24. If 'God is love,' He is equally good and equally deserving of praise, whatever He does. If there are any cases in which He is more virtuous than in others, they are those in which He is obliged to sacrifice his own feelings--the strong affections of his nature, in order to inflict merited punishment on the wicked. But being a benevolent being, He always has one intention, and that a benevolent one; and He is always guided by the same infinite wisdom, therefore his virtue is always one and the same; it is never diminished and can never be increased. Strictly speaking, virtue cannot be predicated of his executive volitions, but only of his one eternal consecration to the good of being. It is evident then, that God is equally worthy of praise at all times, and for every thing that He does. Hence He requires us to give thanks at all times. "In every thing give thanks," the apostle says, "for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." They greatly mistake, who think that God must be praised when He performs certain acts, and only tolerated when He performs others. For instance, that he is more merciful under the gospel than He was under the legal dispensation, and therefore more worthy to be praised now than He was then.

This false notion arises from an ignorance of the fact that God exercises all the attributes of his character in every action, and therefore the different phases of his executive volitions, all have the same moral character, for his character belongs solely to his intention, and that results in all his acts, his mercy, justice, &c. His virtue lies back of his executive actions. It is only the flowing out of the vast fountain of benevolence within Himself.

25. If 'God is love,' it follows that He will do for every individual of his creatures, all that He can wisely do. He will not only do this for the universe at large, but He will also do it for each one of us. Yes, He will do just as much for every individual creature in his universe, as, under existing circumstances, He possibly can. He has done this, and He will continue to do it; and should He do any more or any less for our good, than He is doing and will do, He would commit sin. This follows as self-evident, if it is true that 'God is love.[]'

26. If God is benevolent, He will do all the good by us that He wisely can. He will not let a single hair of our head fall to the ground, for want of doing all the good by us that He possibly can, under existing circumstances. What do you think of that? I tell you that not a sinner will go to hell, if God can wisely and benevolently employ our instrumentality to save him.

27. What God can wisely do for us and by us, must depend mainly on the course we pursue. I did not mean by the preceding remarks, that God could not do more for us and by us, if the circumstances were different. I merely meant to affirm that He has done all that He could, considering the course we have taken, and do take. If we had acted differently, He would have acted differently. If we had done better than we have, God would have made us wiser and better than we are. So the amount of good which is to be done by us, must depend entirely on the course we pursue. God may have done far less for each one of us, than He would have done, had we acted differently towards Him.

28. God is always doing the best for us and all around us, that, under the circumstances He possibly can; but by the exercise of our agency, we may so vary the circumstances, that He will be compelled to change his conduct, or cease to be benevolent. This is evidently true. It is manifest that God must act differently towards us in the different circumstances in which we place ourselves. Now take the case of a sinner. He repents and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ. Will not God at once change his conduct towards him? Suppose that he lays himself out to do good to others; will not God assist him and make him the instrument of doing infinitely more good, than he would have done if he had remained a rebel? The fact is, we may limit the goodness of God to others, in a thousand ways; for what He does for the individual subjects of his moral government, depends, in a great measure, on the voluntary agency of other free beings.

REMARKS.

1. We see why implicit faith and confidence in God is a duty. Faith would not, and could not be a duty, if God was not a God of love; a God of wisdom, in fine, just such a God as the scriptures say He is.
2. If 'God is love,' it follows that any thing inconsistent with perfect confidence in Him is infinitely wicked--hence,
3. Any thing like murmuring against his providences must be very sinful.
4. We see why universal and perfect obedience to God is a duty. If God were not love, obedience to Him would not be a duty. If his laws were not founded on benevolence, we should be under no obligation to obey them. But as God is love, and as his laws were framed with a benevolent intention, we are bound to obey Him, and a rejection of his laws is rebellion against the good of the universe.
5. Our subject gives us a clue to the correct interpretation of the Bible--we must make every thing contained in it, consistent with the perfect benevolence of God. The fact once announced that God is love, every thing in the scriptures must be explained by the light of that truth.
6. We have a key to explain the providences of God. We often hear people say, in a complaining way--"why did God do so and so? Why did He afflict me in such and such a manner?" Now the answer to such questions is obvious--it is because the laws of benevolence demand it. So of all the movements of divine providence, and grace, whether they occasion suffering or happiness, they are all put forth for one and the same reason, and that, because benevolence requires them.
7. The benevolence of God lays no foundation for the inference of universal salvation. It is no more reasonable to infer from the benevolence of God, that misery will not exist in a future world, than it would be to infer from the same premise, that there will be no more misery in this world--it would be just as reasonable to say that pain does not exist at all, as it would be to say that it will not exist to all eternity. But it is correct to say that it will have no power over the holy and the good in a future state. We stand on firm ground when we affirm this, but we have no authority from reason or revelation, for saying that great and incalculable evil will not exist in some part of the universe to all eternity.
8. To my own mind, a weighty objection to the second advent doctrines as now promulgated, is found in the fact that God is love. I cannot see how it could be consistent with the benevolence of God to destroy the world at the present time. So far as we know, and the fact is not disputed by any believer in the doctrines of Christianity, a great majority of those who have inhabited the earth, have gone to hell. Now

God saw this from the beginning, and could He have benevolently ordained the destruction of the world under such circumstances? It is no answer to this argument, to say that "men are free, and can escape hell or not as they please, and therefore God is clear of their blood"--for suppose that there was but one world in the universe, and that God had peopled it with beings who would certainly be eternally miserable, grant if you please that their own agency had made them so--grant that God had done his best to prevent their misery--I ask would God have any right to make such a world? By no means, unless He should see that it would occasion sufficient happiness to Himself, to overbalance the misery of the creatures placed in such circumstances. Now what could be thought of the benevolence of God, if at the present time, under existing circumstances, He should destroy the world? We are to judge of the character of God, by his dealings with us. We are told but little of his doings in heaven--we are not told whether the sun, or the moon, or the stars are inhabited, therefore we must judge of the character of God by his doings here. Let us remember this, and let us remember that when God created the world, He had full knowledge of all that would result from its creation, and if, foreseeing that nine tenths of its inhabitants would be eternally miserable, that a vast majority of those who have peopled it would go to hell--if, I say, notwithstanding all this, He had determined to wipe the world out of existence now, when all or the most of the results have been evil, could we consider Him as a God of love? It is no answer to this question, to say that we do not know how much good God will accomplish in other parts of the universe, by the destruction of the earth at the present time. As I just said, we are to judge of the character of God by his dealings here, not by his actions in other parts of the universe. So far as we can judge, greater evil than good has thus far resulted from the creation of the world, and if it should now be swept out of the universe, could we suppose that it was created with a benevolent design? If God is love, how can it be that the great mass of men will be finally miserable?

9. The fact that God is a benevolent being, appears to me to be a most cogent argument in favor of the doctrine of a temporal millenium, the result of which will be the conversion of the majority of men. No other doctrine, so far as we can judge, is consistent with the benevolence of God. God tells us to reason with Him, and judge for ourselves of his character. Now let us do it. So much does the doctrine of a temporal millenium consist with the benevolence of God, that the mere announcement of the fact that He is love, seems to tell us with trumpet tongue, that He is yet moving on in this world with his great plans of benevolence--that He is going on from conquering to conquer, and that the time will yet come when all shall know the Lord, from the least unto the greatest. I love to dwell upon the character of God in this light. I love to think of Him, not merely as the creator of the universe, but as the great and good governor of all things, who can deign to put his mighty hand into the base affairs of earth, and turn, and overturn, till his benevolent design in creating the earth is fully accomplished--till the majority of men come to be his obedient subjects, while those who are damned will be monuments to warn the universe of the dreadful effects of sin. What! shall God be defeated in his plans? Is it indeed true, as some assert, that the tendency of things on earth is to go backward? If it is how grievously was Christ mistaken, when He compared the kingdom of heaven 'unto leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measure of meal till the whole was leavened.' Some, forsooth, tell us that Christianity is dying out on earth, that the meal is killing the leaven, instead of the leaven leavening the lump. Now God forbid that the tendency of his government should be to retrocession. What! shall the God of the universe, the creator of all things, because the tide of earthly things is rolling back on Himself, and thwarting his mighty plans, crush the world, bury it in everlasting destruction, and send its teeming millions off to hell! Nay, if this be so, we are left to the dim light of inferring that for some inscrutable reason, God created such a world as this. I do not say, that God could not have a good reason for destroying the world at the present moment, but I do say, that if such a reason does exist, He would in some way have made it known to us. But when we open the

Bible, we find the truth that God is love, standing out on every page, like the sun breaking through an ocean of storms, and by its light we can go through all the dark sayings of scriptures, and through the mysterious workings of Providence. It is a key with which we may unlock the designs of God, and learn that this world was created to aid in accomplishing the good of universal being, and that it will not be destroyed till its work is fully done.

10. If God is love, there is no favor too great for Him to bestow. No one need say that he is too insignificant a creature for God to bless, for He is ever ready to bestow the greatest blessings upon us all, whatever may be our condition as soon as He possibly can. He comes close up to our side, and takes every opportunity to do us good--we cannot open our mouths before He is ready to fill them. We need not starve, and wait for God to come to our relief, for He is ever close at hand. If He withholds spiritual blessings from us, we may infer that the difficulty lies with ourselves, not with Him.

Let me say to you, who are impenitent sinners, that if at last you make your bed in hell, you , and not God, will be to blame--and to you who profess to love the Lord, if you have not as much grace as you feel you need, if your experience of heavenly things is cold and barren, be assured that you, and not God, are in fault. He is continually crying in your ears, 'all things are now ready, come ye in and sup with me.' He is ever pressing upon you with all the weight of infinite love, seeking for some nook or corner in your hearts, where He may come in and fill you with all the fulness of his Son.

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