

The Christian's Genuine Hope

by Charles Finney

The Christian's hope is the hope of being like Christ, and of seeing him as he is, and it is the secret of holy living.

Scripture: Romans 8:24, 1 John 3:3

Topics: "Holiness", "Hope"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the significance of the Christian's genuine hope, which is rooted in the expectation of becoming like Christ. He explains that true hope is a combination of desire and expectation, compelling believers to purify themselves in anticipation of seeing Christ as He is. Finney warns against false hopes that lead to complacency and sin, asserting that a genuine hope must manifest in a life striving for holiness. He concludes that many professed Christians lack this true hope, which should inspire earnest efforts towards spiritual growth and transformation.

Transcript

"Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself even as he is pure." --1 John 3:3

The connection of this passage shows what its meaning must be. With admiring wonder the apostle calls our attention to that love bestowed on us by the Father in calling us sons of God. "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called sons of God!" This is a present blessing. "Behold, now are we the sons of God; and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." The thing known and present is our sonship--that we are the sons of God; the thing future and not yet known pertains to what we shall be. This will come to light when Christ shall appear; because, then, seeing Christ as he is, we shall certainly, by the very laws of mind, and in accordance with the divine plan, be like him. This is the thing we hope for. This precisely constitutes the Christian's hope--that he shall see Christ as he is, and be eternally like him.

1. In discussing this subject, I must first define the psychological nature of hope. It is compounded of two elements--desire and expectation. Plainly there must be desire, for an event we dread and fear, we cannot say we hope for. For example, death. The mind that dreads death cannot be said to hope for it, however certain that it must come. So there must also be expectation, at least some degree of it; for no man hopes for what he knows or believes to be impossible.

It should be farther remarked that desire, as an element of hope, should be taken in its broad and comprehensive sense, as implying more than a mere action of the sensibility. It should involve such a

state of mind as calls the will into action. The man not only wishes and wants, but is willing to work for what he honestly hopes to attain.

2. Hope is always a condition of effort to secure its object, and a powerful stimulus to such effort. The object must be desired and chosen; else, it is impossible for the mind to make efforts to attain it. The will must be fixed and fully purposed to secure the object, if possible;--else, no proper exertion will follow. And there must be also expectation; otherwise, the mind will not put forth its energies. A man cannot exert himself sanely and wisely for a thing he knows or even believes to be impossible and not to be at all expected. The object must be deemed possible to be attained; and there must be at least some degree of expectation of its attainment. These elements are not only the conditions, but are the natural stimulus to effective effort. In fact, they necessitate effort. When you apprehend an event or result as a great good, and are led to regard it as attainable, you must of necessity put forth efforts to attain it. This is only the result of a fixed law of mind.

3. A specific hope must secure a corresponding course of life. This follows by necessity from the principles above stated. There are many specific objects of desire and expectation; consequently there must be a great many specific objects of hope. For example, you may hope to get an education. If so, you set your will upon it. Your hope, in proportion to its strength, stimulates your effort. So of wealth, fame, office, honor;--when the elements of hope are present, your efforts are called forth, and you try to attain the hoped for object. So I might go over a vast field, showing that hope invariably does and must produce special effort.

4. The Christian hope is one specific form, and the general laws of mind compel us to apply the principles above explained, to this form also. In fact our text is a distinct affirmation of this sentiment, and gives it a universal application. "Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself." The apostle positively affirms that every instance of this hope will be manifested by the appropriate effort. How can it be otherwise? The object before the mind is the being like Christ. You hope to be like him when you shall see him as he is. Now you can see at once that this hope must beget a constant endeavor to become like Christ now. For what is this hope, and what does it imply? Study this point with care. A true hope of heaven implies a realization of what heaven is; for a man deceives himself if he thinks he has a Christian hope and yet does not rightly apprehend what heaven is. I knew a lady who long time thought she had wanted to go to heaven, and had enjoyed, as she supposed, a Christian hope. But in process of time truth broke in upon her mind and she began to see, as she had not done before, the holiness of heaven. At length the subject came fully before her mind as it were in a blaze of heaven's own light; and she said to her husband, "You know I have long been hoping for heaven, and have supposed myself in a measure prepared for it; but my mind is entirely changed. I do not want to go to heaven; they are so holy there!"

It is most evident that you must have a deep sympathy with heaven, its society, and its employments;--else you cannot by any means have a Christian hope. The Christian hope, is the hope of being like Christ; and for this, you must understand his character--must see its excellence, and the possibility of being like him; this will impel you to labor to be transformed into his likeness.

REMARKS

1. Many have no just idea of the Christian hope. They talk of hoping that they are Christians, as if this were the Christian hope. They hope they are converted, and they take this to be the hope of the Christian; but obviously they have no just conception of what the Christian hope is. Theirs is not a Christian hope, for it

has not the right object. They hope they shall escape punishment; they hope they shall not be doomed to hell; but this is by no means the true end of a Christian hope. And furthermore, they have not the right expectation of attaining the true end; they do not expect to become like Christ; so that both elements of the Christian hope are wanting.

2. A good hope is of priceless value. It is the very secret of holy living. One never lives holy while in despair of attaining to the image of Christ. No man lives holy unless he has the conception of holiness and of heaven. On the other hand a true hope fires the soul with its desire and expectation, and sets it upon mightily energizing to attain the desired object. Hence this is the secret of holy living. I do not say it will produce a holy life without the aid of the Spirit of God; but I do say that the Spirit cannot produce a holy life without this hope. The agency of this hope as a means and an instrumentality seems naturally indispensable.

Without hope none can attain holiness. You cannot attain sanctification without first having the hope of attaining it, and then being stimulated by this hope to make appropriate efforts. Hence, you must expect to attain as a condition of attaining.

3. A good hope naturally secures its object. For example a young man hopes to become a good minister. What will be the effect of this hope? First, he will get before his mind the true ideal of a good minister. He cannot intelligently hope for such a result without this ideal. The very ideal is a first and necessary step towards the attainment of the end. Then, his hope will set him upon efforts. It will make him ever wakeful and ever earnest in the attainment of his object. His hope becomes both condition and stimulus of attainment.

4. A false hope must and will reveal itself in many ways. It will reveal itself by its obviously mistaken end. Suppose it to be the common hope of being a Christian. A man has a hope, he says; you ask him what he hopes for, and he tells you he hopes he is a Christian. This man, perhaps, does not at all conceive what constitutes eternal life. He has never thought of it as being an eternal likeness to Jesus Christ, and an eternal sympathy with him. On the contrary, he thinks of it only, or at least chiefly, as an escape from hell. Now, by natural consequence, this hope will reveal itself as we so often see it--no energizing after holiness--no laboring to be prepared to live forever with Christ; but anything else, rather than this. Yet who does not see that the result of the Christian hope must be a most earnest preparation for the employments of heaven?

A young lady of my acquaintance received a proposal of marriage. She frankly confessed her interest in the proposal, for really she felt the highest esteem for the gentleman who made it. It was indeed this very esteem, coupled with a deep sense of her own deficiencies, which led her to reply--I am not prepared now to become your wife, because I cannot be to you all that a wife ought to be. I can accept your proposal only on the condition that it shall not be consummated for some time to come. Her condition was accepted, and the engagement made. Then the young lady entered upon an era of hope. She thenceforth expected to become his wife, and earnestly desired to become all that the wife of such a man should be. What must be the effect of this hope on her mind? Obviously, it puts her upon most earnest efforts to make all those improvements in her habits and character which she is conscious she needs. Now this illustration touches the very point in hand. The Christian says--I must be prepared to dwell with Christ. I must be in readiness for those divine joys and employments which constitute heaven. The heart is set upon it, and the assured hope of it inspires intense efforts. Such a hope will make a Christian avoid everything that can displease Christ. Suppose that young woman, betrothed, yet delaying marriage with a

man she highly respects and warmly loves, should nevertheless pay no attention to preparing herself for her anticipated married life;--what would you think of her? The supposition is incredible. The things supposed could never all co-exist in a sane mind. The very laws of mind forbid their actual co-existence. So of the Christian. It is utterly impossible that a hope of being like Christ, and of seeing him as he is, should fail to quicken the heart to realize the very result hoped for.

Eternal life is nothing else but sympathy with Christ and its consequences. Becoming like Christ in spirit and temper, you have the life that dwells in him. Your soul is essentially transformed into his moral image.

Some of you have known the personal history of a somewhat distinguished editor of a religious paper, who, after editing it for a season, relapsed into a career of scandalous vice, and finally died a horrible death. It is said that his religious hope, and its action upon his spiritual state, were just such as I have been representing as the spurious hope. He only hoped for an imaginary heaven--not for the fitness which the real heaven requires--not that he might see Christ as he is, or be like him. It operated on his mind thus. When his hope became strong, he became careless, gave himself up to the power of temptation, and relapsed into shameful sin. Then, conscience roused itself; he became alarmed; his hope faded away; he set himself to his religious works, preaching and praying, till he regained his hope, and then fell back again into the same careless and prayerless state as before, only each time a little worse. Then, convicted of sin, he aroused himself once more--went over the same routine, vibrating perpetually from a delusive hope to utter licentiousness of heart and life, until at last death found him, and terminated the scene. Strange he did not see that such a hope revealed at once its utter rottenness! If his had been the true Christian hope, its very nature would have rendered it impossible that he should relapse into sin under its influence. People do not backslide because they have a Christian hope, but because their hope is not genuine. They lose sight of the true object of a Christian hope. Their hope is radically spurious because it has a mistaken object.

A good hope must reveal itself in holy living. What can an unsanctifying hope be good for? It can only deceive and curse its possessor. A hope that makes a man careless and prayerless--what is it good for? Just nothing at all--save to ruin his soul. Such a hope is sheer presumption. So far from being any title to heaven, it is certainly a lure to hell. It is a nuisance to him and to everybody else. If his hope leads him into sin, it is the greatest curse he can have upon him. It is a nuisance to all his acquaintances. The existence of false hopes in the church, is one of the greatest evils in the world. They beget a vast amount of spurious religion. They lead men naturally and of necessity, to misconceptions of what true religion is. By false hopes, as I now use the phrase, I mean those that do not purify the heart. This is the certain mark of their spurious nature.

In the face of our text, and in defiance of the very nature of the case, many persons will hold on to an unsanctifying hope. Despite of the Bible, regardless of the very nature of the Christian hope, both of which forbid them to suppose their hope to be good for anything, they yet persist in the most confident expectation that all will be well. They will even regard any man as their enemy who shall try to tear their hope away, in order to save their soul. It is the greatest presumption possible to hold on to a hope which fails to renew the heart unto holiness.

Many are too proud to confess their hope to be false, when they inwardly know it to be so. They can see that they are surely deceived--but alas, the pride of their heart rebels against any confession of the humiliating truth. I knew the case of a lady who had been a professor of religion for eight years, and had been regarded as a good Christian, but being present on one occasion where a sermon was preached on

the holiness of God, the truth came home to her mind with great power. She sunk upon her seat apparently helpless. The people brought her out at the close of service; I spoke to her, but she was quite unable to make any reply. After being in this state of overwhelming conviction and mental conflict for sixteen hours, she came out into the full light of the Savior's countenance, and then told us how her mind had been exercised. She said, "I saw that I had never known God. When you described his holiness, I saw that I had not the least degree of it myself, and indeed, that I did not wish to have any. I knew then that my character was utterly unlike God's. Then all my Christian hope perished. My whole soul drew back from God, as if it refused to have anything more to do with a being so holy and pure. Then followed convictions of my own sin and guilt--a fearful conflict--until grace triumphed and my soul bowed."

Such experiences are not uncommon. Persons who indulge the Christian hope, do not know how holy God is--have no just appreciations of his character, and therefore do not strive to become like God in this respect. Under this delusion they live, and thus they die, with no suspicion of their mistake until they open their eyes in hell. I have before my mind another case--that of a man who was altogether a leader in the church, and very intimate with the minister who frequented the place. On one occasion, as I was at his house, he asked me what I should think of a man who, day after day, prayed for the Holy Ghost, yet never received it. I replied, I should conclude that he prayed from wrong motives. But, continued he, suppose his motive was, to be happy, what then? That would be altogether selfish, I replied. What motive should he have? he asked. I answered, the same that David had when he prayed for pardoning and restoring grace; "Then will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee." "O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise." He turned suddenly away--said nothing; but, several hours afterward, he came to me and confessed that he turned away, mad at the truth I had presented, and deeply offended that God should require such self-renunciation. He saw himself in his real nakedness, but felt for some time that he had rather die than have it known that he had been deceived. At length he passed safely over that point where so many make shipwreck and are lost.

Backsliders always have false hopes, never a true one, as the very fact of their backsliding shows. If a man backslides, his hope must be bad, for he could not backslide if his hope were "an anchor to his soul, sure and steadfast"--if it were of the scriptural stamp, "a hope that maketh not ashamed." A hope under the influence of which he would "purify himself, even as Christ is pure." The backslider has only the hope that he shall be converted, and this only serves to confirm him in his state of backsliding;--just as the sinner's hope of being one day converted, prevents him from being converted now. If you can tear away this hope, you may save his soul. So, if you can tear away the backslider's hope, you may save his soul; else, it is certainly lost beyond hope. The very idea of backsliding is inconsistent with a gospel hope--such as our text describes.

What is your hope? Some of you hope for an education; some of you for fame; some for respectable connections in society; but have you the Christian's hope? If you have, then your heart is set upon being like Christ. Is it so? Is your heart thus set? Does your hope beget most earnest striving to be like Christ? You have some religious hope of some sort--but is it a true Christian's hope? Many are so entirely in the dark, they hold on to a hope, supposing it all right, when, in the light of the Bible, there is not the first element of a Christian's hope in it. Their hope is their curse and their ruin.

We are compelled to conclude that there are but few of all the professed Christians of our world who have the true Christian's hope. I do not say, that there are but few real Christians--taken absolutely; but I do say their number is small relatively to the great mass who think themselves Christians. There are but few relatively, whose life and spirit show their hopes to be scriptural--but few who are really purifying

themselves, even as Christ is pure.

No good hope can be kept secret. Some people talk of having a secret hope, and speak of others as having a secret hope. The fact is, a hope that can be kept secret, shows itself to be poor and vain. For if it were a good hope, it would lead its possessor to purify himself. No man can throw the energies of his being into the struggle after Christian purity, and still keep his religion a secret. The world will know him; Christian brethren will feel the warmth of his heart.

Some of you have a hope, which, instead of leading you on to a holy life, makes you quiet and easy in your sins. It does not tend at all to make you purify yourself from sin, but on the contrary, it makes you careless and dead in your sins. You know you live in sin, yet you have a hope that you shall be saved at last. Is it not a fact on the very face of it, that your hope is bad, and that your soul is on the way to hell? It has precisely the opposite influence to what it should have; it works more sin rather than more holiness; it fits you for hell--not for heaven; yet you hold on to it as if it were your very life. Do you not see that it must inevitably drown your soul in destruction? It helps you to live careless and prayerless. It impels you after everything else but Christ. Surely you must see that it is leading you down to hell! Unless you abandon it as a nuisance, a curse and a lie, you can never be saved! Put it away as an abomination that is leading your soul down to hell! Why not put it away? What good can it do you? You may just as well have a good hope, in a glorious gospel--a hope that shall purify your heart, and lift you upward to heaven. Why will you have the counterfeit, while the good coin can be had just as well and as cheap? Why cleave to delusion and death, when the truth is free, and eternal life in Christ comes without money and without price?

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