

The Danger of Deception

by Charles Finney

True honesty is not just about acting right in big matters, but also about being honest in small matters, and cultivating strict integrity that affects all areas of life.

Scripture: Job 2:10, Proverbs 11:1, Matthew 5:37, Luke 16:10, Colossians 3:23

Topics: "Honesty", "Integrity"

Description

Charles Finney warns against the danger of deception, emphasizing that dishonesty in small matters reflects a lack of true integrity and principle. He argues that if one is unjust in little things, it reveals a heart not governed by genuine honesty, as true love for God and neighbor would prevent such behavior. Finney illustrates this with examples, including the story of Job, and stresses that moral inconsistency leads to a false sense of righteousness. He calls for believers to cultivate integrity in all aspects of life, as even small acts of dishonesty can tarnish the witness of Christians. Ultimately, he urges that true honesty must be universal, affecting both great and small matters.

Transcript

"He that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much"--Luke 16:10.

Jesus lays down a principle in connection with the parable of the unjust steward: One who is dishonest in small matters is not really honest in anything.

I don't mean that is a person is dishonest in small matters and takes advantage of people that he won't deal openly and honestly in greater matters. Neither do I mean that a man who commits petty theft will necessarily commit highway robbery. One who holds a grudge against a person won't necessarily commit murder. And so on.

What I do mean is that if a man is dishonest in small matters it shows that he is not governed by principle in anything. Real honesty of heart would lead him to act right all the time. If he appears to act honestly in larger things yet acts dishonestly in small matters, he must have other motives than honesty at heart.

MORAL INCONSISTENCY

Many people believe that a person can be honest in great matters and deserve the character of honesty, even though he is dishonest in "little things."

If a supreme regard to the authority of God was the habitual state of his mind, it would be as evident in small matters as well as large. Where the temptation is small, he would be more certain to act conscientiously than in greater matters because there is less to influence him.

What is honesty? If a man has no other motive for acting honestly than mere selfishness, the devil is as honest as he is. Satan is honest with his fellow devils, as far as it is in his interest or policy to be so. Is that honesty? If a man doesn't act honestly from higher motives than this, he is not honest at all; and if he appears to be honest in certain important matters, he has other motives than the honor of or love for God.

Does he love his neighbor as the law of God requires? If he did, he would not defraud him in small things any more than in great. Where the temptation is small, it cannot be that one who truly loves his neighbor would act dishonestly.

Take the case of Job. Job truly loved God, and he endured much distress before he would say a word that even seemed like complaining to God. When the temptation was overwhelming and he could not see any reason for his affliction, his distress became intolerable. His wife told him to curse God and die, but he would not do it. Instead, he said, "Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil." (Job 2:10)

Do you suppose Job would have swerved from his integrity in little things or for small temptations? Never. He loved God. And if you find a man who truly loves his neighbor, you will not see him deceiving or defrauding his neighbor for anything.

The Lord has laid down the principle that if a man is dishonest in small matters, he is not strictly honest at all. Many facts appear to contradict this. We see many men who exhibit a great lack of principle in small matters while in larger things they appear to be honorable and even holy. Their conduct in regard to larger matters can be accounted to other principles than honesty of heart. If we can account for their "honesty" on principles of mere selfishness, then they are not really honest at all. Jesus' principles must be consistent, or else He has affirmed a falsehood.

THE DECEPTION OF FEAR

A man may act honestly in larger matters for fear of disgrace. He may know that certain small things about him are not likely to be mentioned in public, and so he may do them. But the fear of disgrace deters him from doing more obvious things because it will disgrace him. What is this but one form of selfishness overbalancing another form? It is still selfishness, not honesty.

A man may fear that honesty will injure his business. He deals honestly in important matters, while in little things he is ready to take advantage of anyone he can. Thus a man will take advantage of a seamstress and pay her less than he knows she deserves for making a garment. The same individual, in buying supplies, wouldn't think of cheating because it would injure his business. In dealing with an abused and humble person, he can gripe and squeeze out a few cents without fear of public disgrace, while he wouldn't be publicly spoken of as disreputable and base under any circumstances.

Fear of human law may influence a man to act honestly in obvious things, while in such small matters that the law is not likely to notice, he will defraud any time.

The love of praise influences many men to act honestly and even piously in noticeable things. Many men will cheat a poor person out of a few cents in the price of labor, and then, in some great public display,

appear to act generously. Why would a man habitually take advantage of everybody and then give hundreds of dollars to charities? He may do it for the love of praise and not the love of God or man.

A man may be afraid of divine wrath if he commits great dishonest acts and still suppose that God will overlook little things and not notice dishonesty in small matters.

Often individuals who act dishonestly in small affairs will act uprightly and honorable to save their character. Many men are looked upon as honorable dealers by their business associates but are well known by intimate acquaintances to be greedy and overreaching in small matters. It is not real honesty of heart that makes him act with apparent honesty in his public transactions.

An individual may habitually entertain unclean thoughts yet never actually commit adultery. He may be restrained by fear or lack of opportunity and not by principle. If he indulges in unclean thoughts, he would certainly act uncleanly if it were not for other reasons than purity of principle.

He may manifest a covetous spirit yet not steal. But he has the spirit that would lead him to steal if not restrained by other reasons than honesty or principle.

A man may be angry, yet never murder anybody. But his hatred would lead him to do it, as far as principle is concerned. If it is not done, it is for other reasons than true principle.

An individual may oppress his fellowman, enslave him, deprive him of instruction, and compel him to labor without compensation for his own benefit, yet not commit murder. But if he will ruin someone's life to gratify his own pride or promote his own interest, it cannot be principle. Neither love to God or man keeps him from doing anything dishonest.

Anyone who defrauds the United States' treasury of postage would rob the treasury of all its gold if he had the chance. The same motive that led him to do the one would lead him to do the other if he had an opportunity, and if it were not counteracted by some other motive equally selfish.

A man may be guilty of little misrepresentations yet not dare to tell a downright lie. But if he is guilty of coloring the truth to make facts appear other than they really are, he is lying. The individual who does this would manufacture many lies if it were in his interest or he were not restrained by reasons other than a sacred regard to truth.

MAINTAINING FALSE APPEARANCES

Individuals often manifest a lack of principle in regard to the payment of small debts, while they are extremely careful and punctual in paying notes at the bank and in their commercial transactions.

For instance, if a man subscribes to a newspaper and the price is a small sum, he may never pay it. The same man having a debt at the bank would certainly have been punctual. Why? Because if he does not pay, his credit will be injured; but the little debt of five dollars will not be protested. He forgets about it, and the publisher has to send for it or go without his money. Obviously this man does not pay his debts at the bank from honesty or principle but purely from a regard to his own credit and interest.

Some manifest this lack of principle by committing petty theft. If they live in an apartment house, they will steal little things, perhaps light bulbs from the halls. Instead of buying them for himself, he pilfers them one at a time. The individual who does this shows himself to be radically rotten at heart.

I once heard about a similar case. A man was sitting in a room where another gentleman had a tumbler of wine and a pitcher of water. The gentleman stepped out of the room for a moment but accidentally left the door ajar. Looking back, he saw the other man drink a part of the wine in the tumbler; then, to conceal it, he filled up the tumbler with water and took his seat. The individual who did this showed that he loved wine and thought nothing of stealing. As far as principle was concerned, he would get drunk if he had the means and steal if he had a chance; at heart he was both a drunkard and a thief.

People often manifest great dishonesty when they find articles that have been lost, especially articles of small value. One will find a penknife or an umbrella and never make the least inquiry, even among those he has reason to believe were the losers. The man who would do this would keep a checkbook if he should find it. Yet this same individual, if he found five thousand dollars, would advertise it in the newspaper and make a great noise if he knew he'd be found out.

Many individuals conceal little mistakes that are made in their favor, for example, in giving change. If a man would say nothing and let it pass, only opportunity would prevent him from taking any advantage whatever or cheating to any extent.

The real state of a man's heart is often more obvious in small matters than in business or greater importance. Men are often deceived and think that being honest in greater things will prove their honesty of heart, despite their dishonesty in smaller things. They are sure to be on their guard in great things, while they are careless in little matters and so act out their true character.

SIN IS SIN!

The individual who indulges in any one sin does not abstain from sin because it is sin. If he hated sin and was opposed to it because it was sin, he would no more indulge in one sin than another. If a person goes to pick and choose among sins, avoiding some and practicing others, it is certain that he does not regard the authority of God or hate sin.

The man who will not practice self-denial in little things to promote Christianity would not endure persecution for its sake. Those who will not deny their appetite would not endure the scourge or the stake. If persecution were to arise, some might endure it for the sake of the applause it would bring or to show their spirit. There is a natural spirit of obstinacy often roused by opposition that would rather go to the stake than yield a point. But it is not true love to the cause that prompts a man to endure opposition, if he will not endure self-denial in little things for its sake.

Where you find people wearing great amounts of jewelry from vanity, consider them rotten. Men strut with their fancy designer clothes, and women pose in cakes of makeup--it is astonishing how many ways these little things show pride and rottenness of heart.

You say these are little things. I know they are little things, and because they are little things, I mention them. They show a person's character clearly. If their pride was not deeply rooted, they would not show it in little things.

Keep a watch over these little things so you will know your character as it appears to God.

Cultivate strict integrity that will affect small things as well as large. Something beautiful happens when you see an individual acting in little things with careful and conscientious holiness. Until believers cultivate universal honesty, they will always be a reproach to the Lord.

How much would be gained if Christians would display purity and honesty on all occasions and to all people! Sinners often fix their eye on professing Christians' petty offenses. What an everlasting reproach to Jesus!

Of what use is it for a woman to talk to her neighbors about the Lord, when her neighbor knows that she will not hesitate to cheat in petty things? Or why should a merchant talk to his clerks, when they know that however honorable he may be in his public transactions, he is cheap and stingy in little things? It is worse than useless.

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