

The Nature of Impenitence and the Measure of Its Guilt

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes that impenitence is a state of mind characterized by self-seeking and self-gratification, and that guilt is proportioned to the light sinned against.

Scripture: Matthew 11:20

Topics: "Impenitence", "Guilt and Repentance"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the grave nature of impenitence, emphasizing that it is not merely the absence of repentance but an active state of self-seeking and self-exaltation. He explains that impenitence involves a complete devotion to self, where individuals prioritize their own gratification over God's will, leading to a profound guilt that increases with the light they resist. Finney warns that the guilt of impenitent individuals is proportionate to the knowledge and truth they have rejected, making them more culpable than those with less exposure to divine truth. He illustrates that outward moral behavior does not equate to true repentance, as even seemingly virtuous actions can stem from selfish motives. Ultimately, he calls for a deep examination of one's heart to recognize the true nature of sin as impenitence towards God.

Transcript

"Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not. Wo unto thee, Chorazin! wo unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for thee." --Matthew 11:20-24.

In speaking from these words, it will be my object,

I. TO SHOW WHAT IS INCLUDED, OR IMPLIED, IN A STATE OF IMPENITENCE.

II. TO POINT OUT THE GUILT OF THIS STATE OF MIND, AND SHOW THAT IT IS IN PROPORTION TO THE LIGHT UNDER WHICH IT IS INDULGED.

In a recent sermon I aimed to show what repentance is; I now wish to show what constitutes impenitence.

1. It is not, as many seem to suppose, the mere negation of repentance. It is not a negative, blank state of mind--a mere nothing; but is absolute and positive. It involves moral action of the most positive kind.

2. It is that state of self-seeking into which men not influenced by the Spirit of God, always fall. In this state men make themselves and their own supposed good, the object of supreme regard. Their ultimate design in all they do, is their own gratification. I mean all this, and precisely this;--in all they do for others, and in all they think themselves to do for God, their own self is the supreme and ultimate end. Everything terminates in self--or they feel no interest in it.

In other words, impenitence is a state of consecration to self. Beyond all controversy, impenitent men are entirely consecrated--only it is not to God, but to self. To their own gratification, and their own supposed interests, they are supremely devoted.

It is a great mistake, to suppose that impenitent sinners are not devotional. They are most profoundly and perfectly so. You could not ask for more perfect specimens of devotion to a given object--but the object in their case is their own self. It cannot be said that they fall short of entire consecration. With them consecration is never unsteady, fitful, imperfect. Self being their idol, the worship they pay is always ardent, hearty, and consistent with their whole life. Furthermore, the impenitent man consecrates not only his own efforts and interests to himself, but the interests of every other being--of God as far as he can, and of his fellow beings also. All sentient beings in the universe within his reach are laid under contribution to minister to his supreme deity--self. He cares not for God, only as he can make God subservient to himself. He would pray to God, if he could thereby make God his own servant--not otherwise. If he does good to any of his fellow beings, you may be sure he has himself for the ultimate object--this is all; he cares for nothing in the universe, except so far as he can make it subservient to himself.

3. Impenitence is a state of self-exaltation. In this state the man sets himself above every thing else--even above God, and every other being or interest in the universe. Every impenitent sinner makes his own interest and his own will supreme; neither God nor angels, earth nor friends, are placed above self; all are placed in his esteem below himself, and made to bow down in homage and subservience to his own shrine.

4. It is a spirit of self-will; a state in which a man will have every thing in his own way. This man would be ready enough to be a christian--in his own way;--would go to heaven very cordially if he might go as Universalists expect to go, or as infidels dream of going;--his own will being supreme, and his own way being granted him.

5. It is a spirit of self-indulgence. I am aware this sentiment has been expressed in other language; but you will allow me to turn this subject over and over, that you may see all sides of it, and all the terms under which it has been clothed. Now the impenitent man does not always indulge himself in the same way. He may not always choose the gross and scandalous forms of self-indulgence; he may not everywhere be a glutton, a drunkard, a debauchee;--he may deem it more for his interest or taste, to consult his love of reputation, and may choose to indulge this. This may be his strongest passion, and if so, thorough self-indulgence will make him hold in check his grosser passions and appetites, especially if he resides in a truly moral community. But if a good name be his ruling motive, his decent moral conduct, having this for its end, is as real self-indulgence as you ever see in the veriest glutton or debauchee. No matter what the form of self-indulgence may be--its moral character turns upon the fact that it is self-indulgence, and not at

all upon the greater or less decency it may have in the estimation of men.

This point ought to be thoroughly understood. Impenitence is self-indulgence in some form, and what the form shall be, will turn upon the relative strength of his several passions, and his estimate of the expediency under his circumstances of gratifying one rather than another. He may love money too well to be a drunkard, or his reputation too well to be licentious; but while in impenitence, whether he drink or abstain, it is to indulge himself; whether he be a glutton or be temperate in food; whether he be avaricious or prodigal; moral, or immoral; self-indulgence is evermore the one ruling end of his life.

This is equally true of all impenitent men. All the forms of morality you see among them, have the same, and no other root. So of all their forms of religious observance. Whether he go on a pilgrimage, or immure himself in a monastery, or subdue his flesh in his asceticism;--each, or all, are only forms of self-indulgence, one or another being chosen, according to his taste or his faith in its efficacy to subserve his great end of life--selfish good. All is self-indulgence. That devotee who crawls on his knees a thousand miles, and dies, still crawling, does it all for the same end as he who gives himself up to gluttony, or to intoxication--the main difference being that the one expects his good to come now--the other is content to wait for it, say till after death. The woman who takes the veil and goes for life into the nunnery, may go for the very same supremely selfish end as she who betakes herself to the haunts of ill fame. With each her own gratification is the supreme end--if the mind be in a state of impenitence towards God.

6. Another phase of the impenitent spirit is its self-dependence. It never depends on God--always and only on self.

Again, it is a spirit of self-righteousness. It everywhere and always rejects Christ's righteousness, and goes about to establish its own.

It is a state of mind, finally, which cleaves to self, despite of all the claims of God, or of all the universe. Nothing is permitted to sever, or even weaken its supreme regard for its own self.

II. I am to show that the guilt of an impenitent state is always proportioned to the light sinned against.

It is plain that this state of mind in which self is preferred to every thing else, begins in the infant mind, where there is no light at all--when the idea of right and wrong is yet undeveloped. There the little infant chooses his own gratification, by the same law that all other animals choose theirs, and for ought we can see, as innocently, until its reason is in some degree developed, and duty to other beings and other interests is seen to impose a counter claim. We cannot tell how early the reason may begin to develop itself; it is not incumbent upon us to do this; but whenever it is, there moral agency commences; there impenitence begins in the selfish preference of its own little interests, to the greater interests of God, or of other beings. And as ray after ray of light breaks in upon that young mind, setting forth the claims of God right over against the demands of its own self-gratification, guilt is every moment increasing, if this light and the divine claims which it reveals are resisted. Nothing can be plainer than this.

The text obviously teaches this doctrine. It assumes its truth, and bases its augmented wo, upon the cities where Christ preached, on this very ground. So on another occasion Christ said, "If I had not come and spoken among them, they had not had sin; but now have they no cloak for their sin."

Again, as light increases, the obstinacy of the sinner's mind increases, or he cannot remain in a state of impenitent resistance. He must gird him self up to resist, or he could not withstand the force of this light.

How much I have seen of this in revivals of religion. Light pours in--the sense of obligation is quickened--conscience lifts her voice;--but the sinner girds himself for desperate resistance, as he never did before. I have seen it often in this place. Young men here, pressed by truth and the spirit of truth, to yield to God, band themselves together, as if they could not hold out if they stood alone. They hold each other up--taking the same course that devils themselves would take--they gird up their loins for more vigorous effort to resist the claims of God, and maintain their position of impenitence. Of course the guilt of sinners thus resisting, is augmented with fearful rapidity. The woes of Capernaum fall thick and fearfully upon their heads.

Again, as light increases, impenitence continuing, hardness of heart increases. This is only the same thing in other words. Greater and growing resistance of truth involves greater hardness of heart.

Yet again, as light increases, and the sinner girds himself to resist it, God has the greater reason to be incensed against him. How could he provoke God more and worse than he does! He sets at naught both the justice and the mercy of God, and seems determined to thwart every effort God can make to save him. Why should not a holy God give scope to law and justice?

As light increases, sinners see more and more of the folly and madness of their own impenitence. I once fell into conversation with a lawyer of eminence in the State of N. York. He began to cavil resolutely against the claims of the gospel. I headed him in on every side, and showed him that all his cavils only rebounded upon his own head, and aggravated his own guilt. He saw it, and finally acknowledged it, saying, "Well, I know my system will not do to reason upon; I may as well stop as try. I know there is no foundation for my cavils." You do, then, replied I, understand that you have no foundation for your objections against God and his gospel? Yes, I do. Now if this man goes on still in sin, he is in the most guilty state conceivable.

Thus, as light increases, sinners see more and more of the infinite reasonableness of God's claims.

Often, for a time, sinners almost believe their own lies. Perhaps they really labor under great errors of opinion in many points, and these serve to weaken the pressure of God's claims upon their consciences. They see perhaps, a great many difficulties in the way which they know not how to surmount. I know but too well from my early experience, that sinners may involve themselves in error and darkness, from which they cannot readily extricate themselves. As the Bible says--"The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble."

But often, at last, they open their eyes and see the infinite reasonableness of truth. I never shall forget the hour when in my own case the truth broke upon my mind--when I saw that all my cavils were groundless--that all God's ways were right, and all mine wrong. I had been brought up in great darkness, yet in the midst of a Presbyterian congregation, often listening to Old School preaching. But the strain of it was--"you can and you can't," and it filled my mind with utter confusion, and put every great truth of the gospel out of joint, in my mind. It seems to me now, that in all those years of my youth, I never heard one gospel sermon,--not one that I think presented the gospel in its clear and true light. It threw me headlong into all the absurdities of Old School theology, and there I stumbled along, only getting deeper in the mire. I at first got a Bible and placed it among my law books, to study law out of it. This led me to read portions of the old testament, and from this for a time I derived no benefit. But at length I took up the claims of religion as I would any point of law, and while I sought to justify myself in sin, I found, to my surprise, that truth and reason were all against me. Conviction broke on my mind, that God is all right--that I am all

wrong. And do you suppose that I was easy under this conviction? Infinitely far from it. My mind chafed like a chained bear; truth had harpooned me, and I could neither escape nor rest. I fretted, raved against the truth, abused professors of religion; but all this neither changed the truth, nor helped me. My mind rushed one way, and then another way; but in vain, for God, by his Spirit, had anchored his truth deep in my soul, and I seemed to have no power to dislodge it. My mind worked like a steam engine, and seemed laboring under a mighty pressure. So you may have seen the sinner agitated and struggling--God attempting to break him off from his sins, but his iron heart resisting, and holding out in stern rebellion. But guilt is all this while accumulating with fearful rapidity.

Once more; as light increases, impenitence becomes a hard and troubled course. Conscience is ill at ease; the sinner must needs brace himself up against the heaven-sent impulses to repentance; it costs him fresh and painful efforts to remain in impenitence. O what guilt this sinner must incur who will fight his way down to hell against such influences put forth by God to save his soul.

REMARKS.

1. Impenitence is the whole of sin. Nothing else in all the universe is sin but this. Outward actions being only the evidences, or manifestations of the inner moral state, we must turn our eye away from these, and look only at the heart. Then we see that nothing else is sin but impenitence towards God--that supreme regard for self which puts the mind in the attitude of rebellion against God, and against an appropriate regard for any other interests but those of its own self. Self-gratification becomes the one controlling law of action. No matter what form it may take on; its nature changes not. There is only this one thing sought as an ultimate end, by any sinner in earth or hell--self-gratification. The only difference among them all turns upon the different degrees of light sinned against, and this difference affects only the degree, not the kind, or moral quality of their conduct. So, the angel in heaven, and the saint on earth, so far as he is a saint, have each and all but one end in view--to please and glorify God; and here, too, the only difference turns on the different degrees of light which they may enjoy. The saints in earth or heaven, pursue a course right over against that of the sinner; but each class has but one heart--one supreme intention, for this is what is meant by heart. This is uniformly the Bible representation of saints and sinners.

2. There is no difference among sinners, only that the guilt of those who have had greater light, exceeds the guilt of those who have had less. It is vastly important that people would break through the shell and see the kernel of this truth. It ought to be seen by all, and may be. As I said before, no matter where the sinner is, whether in earth or hell; nor who he is, nor what his pursuits are; all is perfect sympathy among sinners of every name and grade and place--even between sinners in hell, and sinners on this earth--just as much as there is perfect sympathy between saints on earth and saints in heaven. Developments and degrees of guilt will vary according to light possessed and controlling circumstances; but no other difference will or can be found.

3. Outward acts are not sin, but are merely the evidences of the mind's state. There is not a particle of sin in your muscles. Even though they may be nerved up to stab your neighbor, yet those muscular movements are not your sins--these lie in an impenitent or selfish heart.

4. Outward acts and manifestations will of course be modified by circumstances. Suppose a man has for his supreme end his own gratification. Place him under one set of circumstances, and you will see one development of character; change his circumstances, and you will see another development of character. Take a man who in a loose community has been of loose morals himself, and transfer him to a religious

and moral community, and you may anticipate a marked change, not in his character, but in its manifestation. If his love of reputation is strong, he will conform to his company enough to secure reputation as well as he conveniently can. He will be likely to become outwardly a religious man. He will probably become very moral, and perhaps a professed Christian. Why? Because his love of reputation is a controlling principle

The truth will justify a still stronger supposition. Let an impenitent man change his circumstances as we have supposed, and it will not merely affect his outward conduct, but will lead him to sympathize very strongly in his feelings with Christian people. This will be a natural result of his association with them. And yet the man may not be at all aware that it is his love of reputation that has brought him to this state of feeling, so changed from what he experienced when associated with wicked men. Hence it will be no strange thing if he comes to think himself a Christian. And indeed a great change has come over him, if you look only at his external conduct and his sympathy with his associates.

We may suppose that before a young man comes into this community, he was in the habit of frequenting balls, often drank freely, and nearly to intoxication and spent his money generously so as to be thought a hale fellow among his comrades; but he comes here--finds a different set of associates--breaks off his former habits and falls in with theirs--finds that his sympathies set almost as strongly with his new associates as they did with his old ones, and, amazed, he cries out--How changed I am! Surely this must be religion! It must be that I have become a Christian! I have no taste for strong drink--can do without my cigars--am just as happy without balls and routes; indeed I seem to take much the same pleasure in religious meetings now as I did in my social convivialities then; it must be that I am indeed converted! Now this man does not consider that all this change in him may result from the change in his circumstances, and that under the influence solely of his love of reputation and of the law of sympathy with associates he may experience all this change without a particle of religion. Indeed if he loves his own reputation and is a thoroughly selfish man, he will naturally modify his course to suite his changed circumstances.

Again, as selfish considerations alone produce this change, the improvement made in his deportment or in his sympathies may not make his guilt at all the less;--nay, it may be really greater now than it was before. If his light is greater, of course his guilt will be.

Let us look at this supposed case again. That young man who came here used now and then to get drunk--to visit her "whose house is the way to hell"--to laugh and jeer at prayer and piety; but now mark the change;--he comes into a religious family and bows the knee with them in prayer; he goes regularly with them to social worship, nay perhaps he even prays sometimes in his closet; the profane oath, the derisive laugh at religion and the daring deeds of sin are abandoned;--and with one voice the people say--how much this man is improved! But mark ye; if his light has increased and he has not repented of his sins before God, his guilt is greater than ever before, instead of being less. He is just as selfish--just as really opposed to God as he ever was, and the fact that he manages it in a more decent way and has adopted a mode of sinning which conforms itself to his circumstances only shows that he uses some discretion in carrying out the ruling principle of his heart.

But we may take a case even stronger still. Let a man come into Oberlin who has been an atheist and a pirate--for most pirates are in principle atheists; take one who has been raised among bloody men in the Spanish West Indies, who boasted in New York city that he had murdered five hundred men--let this man come into Oberlin to reside among us. He has a friend here and after staying awhile with his friend, he takes it into his head that he will get an education. You may look into his trunk and you find it full of bowie

knives and pistols; examine his overcoat, you will find his pockets freighted with death-weapons; he wears them for awhile, but soon is ashamed to do what nobody else here does and lays them carefully away where none will ever see them. By and by you see him in a prayer-meeting--the man who used to make the very air blue around him with horrid blasphemy, is in the place of prayer and on his knees, and possibly you may hear his voice in supplication;--at all events, you see him civil, respectful towards religion--he gives up his atheism; but we may suppose continues still impenitent. Yet he professes to approve the plan of salvation and proclaims it a glorious plan. Now this man, so changed--so humanized, so much better as a citizen than before, may really be ten-fold more the child of hell now than ever before. Do you ask, how can this be? I answer, for the simple reason that his light is indefinitely greater than it was before, and yet he remains a selfish, impenitent man. His resistance to light and consequently his guilt against God are vastly enhanced by this change through which he has passed.

Until we get hold of the true idea of sin and holiness, we can never tell when men are growing better. We shall make the most egregious mistakes, and have no standard by which to correct them.

You might take this man, formerly so vile, and vicious; you might wash and white-wash his exterior ever so much; you might fit him for any lady's saloon, nay so far as the exterior is concerned, you might fit him to grace a mansion among angels, yet if he remains an impenitent sinner, he has only become the more wicked; that outside finish is only the garnishing of a sepulcher, which within is all pollution.

There are probably in this place, nay even under the sound of my voice, persons more guilty than any pirates in the universe--more monstrously wicked than the pirate Gibbs, who boasted that he had murdered so many men. The selfishness of Gibbs took one particular form;--the selfishness of gospel-hardened sinners here, a different form;--different, but not a whit less hostile to God, or less odious in his sight, or less really depraved and worthy of eternal condemnation. The blackest malignity as estimated by God belongs to that form of selfishness which has resisted and still resists most light.

There may be some young women here more abominably wicked than you can find in the most polluted harlot's house--even young women against whose virtue and external conduct no charge can lie, and who can scarce hear the word licentiousness without a blush. Now wherein lies the difference between this refined, impenitent young lady, and the most corrupt harlot? Only in this; that each seeks her own self-gratification, but in different ways, and the one persists in this self-seeking despite the influence of more light and stronger dissuaves from heaven, earth, and hell, than are present to the mind of the other. She who has most of Capernaum's light to sin against must have most of Capernaum's woes to suffer, and for the best of reasons. The ultimate end of moral action--the only thing at which God looks, being the same in both cases, each has the same kind of moral character; and the difference in degree of guilt remains to be estimated by the amount of light enjoyed and resisted.

Again, as each sinner, remaining impenitent, resists all the light he has, he is just as wicked, as under his circumstances, he can be. He persists in being supremely selfish despite of every reason known to him why he should repent;--how then can he be any more wicked, until he has more light to resist? You will all see this point clearly if you once get thoroughly before your mind the two points I have been laboring to elucidate--namely:

(1.) That guilt is always and only in proportion to light resisted. And,

(2.) That while impenitence continues, all those modifications of the external conduct which are only a choice among different forms of rebellion against God, have absolutely nothing to do in the estimation of a

sinner's guilt. Let these points be well understood, and you will readily see that every sinner who resists all the light he has is just as wicked as, under his circumstances, he can be.

Again, just in proportion as light increases, sinners are in danger of committing the unpardonable sin. It is plain from what the Bible says of this sin that only those commit it who have great light and who resist and abuse that light. Those Pharisees who blasphemed the Holy Ghost, knew full well that Christ's miracles were wrought by the finger of God, and yet they impiously ascribed them to the devil. They had great light, and they greatly abused it.

Now we may ultimately see that more persons commit the unpardonable sin in Oberlin than any where else in all the land, for the reason that great light is enjoyed here, and by some is greatly and impiously resisted.

This is the climax of all sin. To know enough of God to make you an angel and then resist it madly and malignantly enough to make you a devil--what can be a greater sin? What can be greater folly and shame and madness?

Yet we are not wont to estimate guilt according to these plain principles of the Bible and of reason. We see a pirate--we are shocked;--we cry out--"He is a pirate! Horrible! He has murdered a hundred men! Oh, such a wretch! Surely he is not fit to live." Indeed he is a wretch, a horrible and wicked wretch;--but there perhaps, sits another impenitent sinner who could not see blood spilt without having his own blood creep in his veins, who yet is the guiltier sinner of the two. This sinner, here in Oberlin, has been brought up religiously, has heard preaching enough to have converted a thousand souls, but has heard it only to harden his own heart--this sinner may be a hundred fold more guilty than any pirate, and much more likely to have committed the unpardonable sin. Let the gospel-hardened soul take warning!

Again, in the light of this subject we see how to account for the events which not unfrequently occur in the world's history. The most notorious sinners, it sometimes happens, are soon converted when they come under instruction, while in very religious places, it is almost impossible to promote a revival of religion and secure the conversion of sinners. You may go into the Sodoms of the land--the no-God settlements, as they are or may be called, and there you may find the word of God will fall with power on many hearts. I once went into a place called Sodom--notorious for its daring wickedness, where there was but one professor of religion and he bore the name of Lot. This man had invited me there to preach. I went--I came to the place of meeting and the people were all there; yet I felt strangely--could not fix my mind on any text to preach from--seemed perfectly shut up--but trusting in God I began the exercises: felt enlarged in prayer, and finally seized upon the text--"Up, get ye out of this place, for the Lord will destroy this city." It was a curious looking congregation. For a while I thought they would very likely pitch at me and drag me out of the house--they seemed ready to devour me in some way--but presently I saw what was moving their minds--the truth of God fell like quick, successive peals of thunder on their hearts; one after another fell from their seats; weeping, wailing, cries, screams, and prayers for mercy filled the whole house. I had to stop preaching, for I could not go on at all; and why? What was the matter? Only this: there was a company of ignorant persons who had indeed been regarded as the most wicked of sinners, but they had not hardened their hearts under the preaching of the gospel, and now when they came to hear a gospel sermon, its truth fell on their hearts like life from the dead.

So when you see a harlot converted, or a profane swearer or a notorious Sabbath-breaker, how do you account for the fact? You can ascribe it to the circumstance that they have not resisted so much light as

thousands who have lived their life long under the gospel and consequently have not committed the unpardonable sin.

But look into that deacon's family, and that minister's family: there is a son or a daughter there who has lived amid the focal blaze of God's truth for years; is he converted? No--he is gospel hardened.

Finally, gospel hardened sinners and backsliders are the very worst people this side of hell. No matter how morally or genteelly their outside deportment may be modified, they have resisted all the light God could give them and have fearfully filled up the measure of their guilt. That pious father may have great hopes of his morally behaved son--may think perhaps to train him for the ministry--Oh! does he not see that his hardened son is more fit for a minister of hell than of Christ and of heaven? That son may know enough of the gospel, it may be, to preach it; but if, with all this knowledge, he only hates that gospel: if he has trained himself to resist all this truth and all these motives which he has heard until they are to him an old story: then indeed is he far more fit to be an apostle of Satan than of Jesus Christ. The very worst character such a man can bear is that of an impenitent sinner. He cannot possibly do a worse thing than to persist in his impenitence under all the light which God pours upon his path from heaven.

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