

The Pursuit of Selfishness

by Charles Finney

True Christianity consists in prioritizing the glory of God and the happiness of others above one's own interests.

Scripture: Matthew 6:20, 1 Corinthians 13:5

Topics: "True Happiness", "Selflessness"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that true Christian love, as described in 1 Corinthians 13:5, does not seek its own interests but prioritizes the happiness and well-being of others. He argues that while it is not wrong to care for our own happiness, it should not be our supreme goal; rather, we should aim to glorify God and serve others. Finney illustrates that genuine happiness is found not in selfish pursuits but in selfless acts of love and benevolence. He warns against the dangers of selfishness, asserting that true Christianity is about aligning our desires with God's glory and the good of others. Ultimately, he encourages believers to pursue holiness and benevolence, which will lead to true joy and fulfillment.

Transcript

"Love.....seeketh not her own"--1 Corinthians 13:5

Charity, or Christian love, "seeketh not her own." The question is not whether it is lawful to have any regard to our own happiness. On the contrary, part of our duty is to regard our own happiness according to its value in the scale with other interests. God has commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves. This plainly makes it a duty to love ourselves and regard our own happiness by the same rule that we regard the happiness of others.

We must regard the promises of God and threatenings of evil as affecting ourselves. But a threat against us is not as important as a threat against a large number of individuals. Imagine a threat of evil against yourself as an individual. This is not as important as if it included your family. Then imagine it extended to the congregation, the state, the nation, or the world. The happiness of an individual, although great, should not be regarded as supreme.

I am a minister. Suppose God says to me, "If you do not do your duty, you will be sent to hell." This is a great evil, and I ought to avoid it. Instead, imagine Him to say, "If your people do not do their duty, they will all be sent to hell. But if you faithfully do your duty, you will save the whole congregation." Is it right for me to be as much influenced by the fear of evil to myself as by the fear of having a whole congregation sent to hell?

GODLY INFLUENCE OR FEAR?

The Bible tells us, "Labor not for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life" (John 6:27). This teaches that we are not to value earthly interests at all compared to eternal life.

Our Savior says, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on the earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal" (Matthew 6:20-21).

When Christ sent out His disciples, two by two, to preach and to work miracles, they came back full of joy and exultation because they found even the devils yielding to their power. "Lord, even the devils are subject unto us." Jesus answered, "Rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:17,20). Here He teaches that it is a greater good to have our names written in heaven than to enjoy great temporal power, even authority over devils themselves.

The Bible teaches preference of eternal good over temporal good. This is different than regarding our own individual interest as the supreme object.

Hope and fear should influence our conduct. But when we are influenced by hope and fear, the things that are hoped or feared should be put into the scale according to their real value in comparison with other interests.

Noah was moved with fear and built the ark. But was it the fear of being drowned himself or the fear for his own personal safety that chiefly moved him? The Bible does not say it. He feared for the safety of his family, and he dreaded the destruction of the whole human race.

Good men are influenced by hope and fear. However, this hope and fear respecting their own personal interest is not the controlling motive. This is not affirmed in the Bible. They must be influenced by promises and threats. Otherwise, they could not obey the second part of the law: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Is supreme regard to our own happiness Christianity? Are we to fear our own damnation more than the damnation of all other men and the dishonor to God? Are we to aim at securing our own happiness more than the happiness of all other men and the glory of God?

All true Christianity consists in being like God--acting on His principles and grounds and having His feelings towards different objects.

BENEVOLENCE AND COMPLACENCY

The Bible tells us that "God is love" (1 John 4:16). Love is the sum total of His character. All His other moral attributes, such as justice, mercy, etc., are only modifications of this love. His love is manifested in two forms. One is benevolence--desiring the happiness of others. The other is complacency--approving the character of others who are holy.

God's benevolence regards all beings who are capable of happiness. This is universal. He exercises the love of complacency toward all holy beings. In other words, God loves His neighbor as Himself. He considers the interests of all beings, according to their relative value, as much as His own. He seeks His

own happiness, or glory, as the supreme good--not because it is His own, but because it is the supreme good. The sum total of His happiness, as an infinite being, is greater than the sum total of the happiness of all other beings or of any possible number of finite creatures.

Imagine a man that is kind to animals. This man and his horse fall into the river. Now, does true Christian love require the man to drown himself in order to save his horse? No. It would be true benevolence to save himself. His happiness is of much greater value than that of the horse. But the difference between God and all created beings is infinitely greater than between a man and a horse or between the highest angel and the lowest insect.

God, therefore, regards the happiness of all creatures precisely according to their real value. Unless we do the same, we are not like God. If we are like God, we must regard God's happiness and glory in the same light that He does--as supreme good, beyond everything else in the universe. If we desire our own happiness more than God's happiness, we are unlike God.

To aim supremely at our own happiness is contrary to the Spirit of Christ. We are told that "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (Romans 8:9). Jesus, as a man, did not seek His own glory. What was He seeking? Was it His own personal salvation or happiness? No. It was the glory of His Father and the good of the universe through the salvation of men. He came to benefit the Kingdom of God--not to benefit Himself. This was "the joy that was set before Him," for which He "endured the cross, despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:2)

The sum of the gospel is this: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself" (Luke 10:27). Benevolence toward God and man is the great requirement. To love the happiness and glory of God above all other things is lovely and desirable and is the supreme good.

Some have objected that it is not our duty to seek the happiness of God because His happiness is already secured. Suppose the king of England is perfectly independent of me and is happy without me. Does that make it less my duty to wish him will, to desire his happiness, and to rejoice in it? Because God is happy, independent of His creatures, should we not love His happiness and rejoice in it?

DYING TO SELF

To seek our own happiness as our supreme end is contrary to the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle begins, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (verses 1-3).

Paul couldn't have expressed the idea that charity (love), or benevolence, is essential to Christianity in stronger language. He lowers his guard on every side and makes it impossible to mistake his views: If a person has no true love, he is nothing.

Paul then shows what the characteristics of this true charity are: "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Here you see that one leading peculiarity of this love is that charity "seeketh not her own." Many passages plainly teach the same thing. "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it" (Matthew 16:25). An established principle of God's government is that if a person aims supremely at his own interest, he will lose his own interest.

The same principle is taught later in this epistle: "Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth" (1 Corinthians 10:24). If you look at the passage, you will see that the word wealth is in italic letters, showing that it was added by the translator and is not in the Greek. They could have as easily used the word "happiness" or "welfare" as wealth.

Paul also says, "even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved" (1 Corinthians 10:33). Therefore, to make our own interest our supreme object is as contrary to the gospel as it is to the law.

A supreme regard to our own happiness is not virtue. Men have always known that to serve God and benefit mankind is what is right, and to seek supremely their own personal interest is not right. Consequently, we see how much pain men take to conceal their selfishness and appear benevolent. Unless his conscience is blunted by sin or perverted by false instruction, any man can see that to place his own happiness above more important interests is sinful.

Right reason teaches us to regard all things according to their real value. God does this, and we should do the same. God has given us the ability to reason for the purpose of weighing and comparing the relative value of things. It is a mockery of reason to deny that it teaches us to regard things according to their real value. To aim at and prefer our own interest is contrary to reason.

CHASING AFTER HAPPINESS

Look at the common sense of mankind in regard to what is called patriotism. No man was ever regarded as a true patriot if his object was to observe his own interest. Suppose his object in fighting was to get himself crowned king; would anybody give him credit for patriotism? All men agree that patriotism is when a man fights for his country's sake. The common sense of mankind understands that a reprobate spirit seeks its own things and prefers its own interests to the greater interests of others.

Happiness is the gratification of desire. We must desire something and gain the object we desire. If a man desires his own happiness, the object of his desire will always keep just ahead of him like his shadow. The faster he pursues it, the faster it flies. Happiness is inseparably attached to the attainment of the object desired.

Suppose I desire a thousand dollars. When I get it that desire is gratified and I am happy. But if I desire the thousand dollars for the purpose of getting a watch, a shirt, etc. the desire is not gratified until I get those things.

But suppose the thing I desired was my own happiness. Getting the thousand dollars does not make me happy because that is not the thing my desire was fixed on. And getting the watch, the shirt, and other things will not make me happy either, for they do not gratify my desire.

God has so constituted things and given such laws to the mind that man can never gain happiness by pursuing it. This very makeup plainly indicates the duty of disinterested benevolence. Indeed, He has made it impossible for them to be happy, except to the degree that they are disinterested.

Imagine two men walking along the street together. They come across a man who has just been run over and lies bleeding by the curb. They pick him up and carry him to the hospital. Their gratification is in proportion to the intensity of their desire for his relief. If one of them felt and cared little about the suffering of the poor man, he would be little gratified. But if his desire to have the man relieved amounted to agony, his gratification would be accordingly.

Suppose a third individual has no desire to relieve the distress man. Helping him would be no gratification to that person. He could pass right by him and watch him die. He is not gratified at all. Therefore, happiness is in proportion to gratified desire.

In order to make the happiness of gratified desire complete, the desire itself must be virtuous. If the desire is selfish, the gratification will be mingled with pain from conflict in the mind.

That all this is true is a matter of consciousness and is proved to us by the very highest kind of testimony we can have. For anyone to deny this is to charge God foolishly as if He had given us a makeup that would not allow us to be happy in obeying Him.

Men may enjoy a certain kind of pleasure that is not true happiness. Pleasure that does not spring from the gratification of a virtuous desire is a delusion. The reason men do not find happiness, when they are all so anxious for it, is that they are seeking it. If they would seek the glory of God and the good of the universe as their supreme end, happiness would pursue them.

If each individual aimed at his own happiness as his chief end, their interests would unavoidably collide. Universal war and confusion would follow the train of universal selfishness.

COMMON SENSE AND CONSCIENCE

To maintain that a supreme regard to our own interest is true Christianity is to contradict the experience of the saints. Every true saint knows that his supreme happiness consists in denying himself and regarding the glory of God and the good of others. If he does not know this, he is not a Christian.

Many people who have had a selfish religion have realized their mistake and come to understand true Christianity. I have know hundreds of such cases, and they testify they know now, by experience, that benevolence is true Christianity.

Every impenitent sinner knows he is aiming supremely at his own interest, and he knows that he doesn't have the truth. The very thing that his conscience condemns him for is that he is regarding his own interest instead of the glory of God.

If a supreme regard to our own interest (because it is our own) is true Christianity, then it will follow that God is not holy. God regards His own happiness because it is the greatest good, not because it is His own. He is love, or benevolence; and if benevolence is not true Christianity, God's nature must be changed.

If a supreme regard to our own happiness is Christianity, then the law should read, "Thou shalt love thyself with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength, and God and thy neighbor infinitely less than thyself."

When we place our happiness first, we must change "Whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" to "Do all for your own happiness." Instead of "He that will save his life shall lose it," we find it saying, "He that is anxious to save his own life shall save it; but he that is benevolent and willing to lose his life for the good of others, shall lose it."

The consciences of men would be changed to testify in favor of selfishness and condemn everything concerning love.

Right reason would be made not to weigh things according to their relative value but to decide that our own little interest is of more value than the greatest interests of God and the universe.

The human makeup would be reversed. If supreme selfishness is virtue, the human constitution was made wrong. And if Christianity consists in seeking our own happiness as a supreme good, then the more faith a man has the more miserable he is.

The whole framework of society would have to be changed. The public good would be best promoted when every man is scrambling for his own interest regardless of the interests of others.

The experience of the saints would have to be reversed. Instead of finding that the more love they have, the more happiness they have, they would testify that the more they aim at their own good, the more they enjoy the favor of God.

The impenitent would testify that they are supremely happy in supreme selfishness.

I will not pursue this proof any further. It has been fully proven that to aim supremely at our own happiness is inconsistent with Christianity.

SELFISHNESS OR TRUE CHRISTIANITY?

Most men do not know what true happiness is, and they seek it in vain. They do not find it because they are pursuing it. If they would turn around and pursue holiness, then happiness would pursue them. If they would become disinterested and determine to do good, they could not help being happy. If they choose happiness as an end, it flies away from them. True happiness consists in the gratification of virtuous desire; and if they would set themselves to glorify God and do good, they would find it.

Many say, "Who will take care of my happiness if I do not? If I am to care only for my neighbor's interest and neglect my own, none of us will be happy." That would be true if your concern for your neighbor's happiness was a detraction from your own. But if your happiness consists in doing good and promoting the happiness of others, the more you do for others, the more you promote your own happiness.

It would be selfishness in God if He regarded His own interest supremely because it is His own. Whoever maintains that a supreme regard to our own interest is Christianity maintains that selfishness is Christianity.

If selfishness is virtue, then benevolence is sin. They are direct opposites and cannot both be virtue. For a man to set up his own interest over God's interest is selfishness. If this is virtue, then Jesus Christ

departed from the principles of virtue.

Those who regard their own interest as supreme and think they are Christians are deceived. I say it solemnly because I believe it is true, and I would say it if it was the last word I was to speak before going to the judgment. As God is true and your soul is going to the judgment, you do not have the Christianity of the Bible if you are selfish.

Are we to have no regard to our happiness? If so, how are we to decide whether it is supreme or not? You may regard it according to its relative value. Is there any real practical difficulty here? I appeal to your consciousness. If you are honest, you know what your priorities are. Are your interests on one side and God's glory and the good of the universe on the other? Or are they so closely balanced in your mind that you cannot tell which you prefer? It is impossible! If you are not just as conscious that you prefer the glory of God to your own interests as you are that you exist, you may take it for granted that you are all wrong.

CHOOSING TO PURSUE HOLINESS

If you really regard the glory of God and the good of mankind, your enjoyment will not depend on evidence. Those who are purely selfish may enjoy much in religion, but it is by anticipation. The idea of going to heaven is pleasing to them. But those who are purely benevolent have heaven present in their hearts.

Anyone who had no peace and joy in the Lord before they had a hope is deceived. How very different is the experience of a true Christian! His peace does not depend on his hope. True submission and benevolence produce peace and joy independent of hope.

Suppose a prisoner is condemned to be hung the next day. Walking his cell and waiting for dawn, he is in great distress. A messenger comes with a pardon. He seized the paper, turns it up to the dim light coming through his grate, reads the word pardon, and leaps for joy. He thinks the paper is genuine. Now suppose it turns out that the paper is counterfeit. Suddenly his joy is all gone.

It is the same in the case of a deceived person. He was afraid of going to hell, and of course he rejoices if he believes he is pardoned. If the devil told him so and he believed it, his joy would be just as great as if it were a reality.

True Christian joy does not depend on evidence. The true Christian commits himself into the hands of God with confidence, and that very act gives him peace. He had a terrible conflict with God, but all at once he yields and say, "God will do right, let God's will be done."

Then he begins to pray and melts before God. That very act affords sweet, heavenly joy. Perhaps he has not thought of a hope. He may go for hours or even days, full of joy in God, without thinking of his own salvation. His joy does not depend on believing that he is pardoned but consists in a state of mind, resting in the government of God. In such a state of mind he can not help being happy.

Hope-seekers will always be disappointed. If you run after hope, you will never have a hope good for anything. But if you pursue holiness, then hope, peace, and joy will come naturally. Is your faith the love of holiness, God, and souls? Or is it only a hope? Look at God's whole character and see the reasons why you should love Him. Throw yourself upon Him without reserve and without distrust. Instead of shrinking from Him, come to Him and say, "Father in heaven, you are sovereign and good. I submit to your government and give myself to you--all I have and all I am, body and soul, for time and eternity.

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