

The Rule by Which Guilt of Sin Is Estimated

by Charles Finney

The rule by which guilt of sin is estimated is determined by the degree of light under which the sinful intention is formed, or in other words, it is to be measured by the mind's knowledge or perception of the value of that end which the law requires to be chosen.

Scripture: Acts 17:30

Topics: "Guilt", "Moral Obligation"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that the measure of guilt in sin is determined by the degree of knowledge and light one possesses regarding moral obligation. He explains that moral obligation is rooted in the intention of the mind and the understanding of the value of the good to be chosen. Finney argues that guilt cannot be assessed by the nature of the sin or the authority of God alone, but rather by the awareness of the moral law and the rejection of the highest good, which is the well-being of God and the universe. He warns that those with greater knowledge of their duty incur greater guilt, making the impenitent sinner in a Christian context more culpable than those in ignorance. The sermon calls for self-examination and repentance, highlighting the grave consequences of ignoring the light one has received.

Transcript

"And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead." -- Acts 17:30, 31.

THE text declares that God will judge the world in righteousness. I shall not at this time dwell on the fact that God will judge the world, nor upon the fact that this judgment will be in righteousness; but shall endeavour to ascertain what is the rule by which our guilt is to be measured; or in other words what is implied in judging the world in righteousness. What is the righteous rule by which guilt is measured, and consequently the just punishment of the sinner allotted?

In pursuing this subject, I shall deem it important:

I. TO STATE BRIEFLY WHAT THE CONDITIONS OF MORAL OBLIGATION ARE; and

II. COME DIRECTLY TO THE MAIN POINT, THE RULE BY WHICH GUILT IS TO BE MEASURED.

I. State briefly what the conditions of moral obligation are.

1. Moral obligation has respect to the ultimate intention of the mind. The end had in view, and not the mere external act, must evermore be that to which law pertains and of which guilt is predicated. Surely guilt cannot be predicated of the outward act merely, apart from intention: for if the outward act be not according to the intention, as in the case of accidents, we never think of imputing guilt; and if it be according to the intention, we always, when we act rationally, ascribe the guilt to the intention, and not to the mere hand or tongue, which became the mind's organ in its wickedness.

This is a principle which everybody admits when he understands it. The thing itself lies among the intuitive affirmations of every child's mind. No sooner has a child the first idea of right and wrong, but he will excuse himself from blame by saying that he did not mean to do it, and he knows full well, that if this excuse be true it is valid and good as an excuse; and moreover he knows that you and everybody else both know this and must admit it. This sentiment thus pervades the minds of all men and none can intelligently deny it.

2. Having premised so much, I am prepared to remark that the first condition of moral obligation is the possession of the requisite powers of moral agency. There must be intelligence enough to understand in some measure the value of the end to be chosen or not chosen, else there can be no responsible choice. There must be some degree of sensibility to good sought, or evil shunned; else there never would be any action put forth, or effort made; and there must also be the power of choice between possible courses to be chosen. These are all most manifestly requisites for moral choice, or in other words for responsible moral action and obligation.

3. It is essential to moral obligation that the mind should know in some measure, what it ought to intend. It must have some apprehension of the value of the end to be chosen, else there can be no responsible choice of that end, or responsible neglect to choose it. Everybody must see this, for if the individual when asked, why he did not choose a given end, could answer truly, "I did not know that the end was valuable and worthy of choice"; all men would deem this a valid acquittal from moral delinquency.

4. Supposing the individual to know what he ought to choose, then his obligation to choose it does not grow out of the fact of God's requiring it, but lies in the value of the end to be chosen. I have said that he must perceive the end to be chosen, and in some measure understand its value. This is plain. And this apprehension of its value is that which binds him to choose it. In other words, the moral law which enjoins love, or good willing must be subjectively present to his mind. His mind must have a perception of good which he can will to others, in connection with which a sense of obligation to will it springs up, and this constitutes moral obligation. These are substantially the conditions of moral obligation; the requisite mental powers for moral action; and a knowledge of the intrinsic value of the good of being.

Before leaving this topic, let me remark that very probably, no two creatures in the moral universe have precisely the same degree of intelligence respecting the value of the end they ought to choose; yet shall moral obligation rest upon all these diverse degrees of knowledge, proportioned ever more in degree to the measure of this knowledge which any mind possesses. God alone has infinite and changeless knowledge on this point.

II. I come now to speak of the rule by which the guilt of refusing to will or intend according to the law of God must be measured.

1. Negatively, guilt is not to be measured by the fact that God who commands is an infinite being. The measure of guilt has sometimes been made to turn on this fact, and has been accounted infinite because God whose commands it violates is infinite. But this doctrine is inadmissible. It lies fatally open to this objection, that by it all sin is made to be equally guilty, because all sin is equally committed against an infinite being. But both the Bible and every man's intuitive reason proclaim that all sins are not equally guilty. Hence the measure or rule of their guilt cannot be in the fact of their commission against an infinite being.

2. Guilt cannot be measured by the fact that God's authority against which sin is committed is infinite. Authority is the right to command. No one denies that this in God is infinite. But this fact cannot constitute the measure of guilt, for precisely the reason just given -- namely, that then all sin becomes equally guilty, being all committed against infinite authority; which conclusion is false, and therefore the premises are also.

3. The degree of guilt cannot be estimated by the fact that all sin is committed against an infinitely holy and good being; for reasons of the same kind as just given.

4. Nor from the value of the law of which sin is a transgression; for though all admit that the law is infinitely good and valuable, yet since it is always equally so, all sin by this rule must be equally guilty -- a conclusion which being false, vitiates and sets aside our premises.

5. The rule cannot lie in the value of that which the law requires us to will, intend or choose, considered apart from the mind's perception of the value; for the intrinsic value of this end is always the same, so that this rule too, as the preceding, would bring us to the conclusion that all sins are equally guilty.

6. Guilt is not to be measured by the tendency of sin. All sin tends to one result -- unmingled evil. No created being can tell what sins have the most direct and powerful tendency to produce evil; since all sin tends to produce evil and only evil continually. Every modification of sin may for aught we know tend with equal directness to the same result -- evil, and nothing but evil.

7. Guilt cannot be measured by the design or ultimate intention of the sinner. It does indeed lie in his design and in nothing else; yet you cannot determine the amount of it by merely knowing his design; for this design is always substantially the same thing -- it is always self-gratification in some form, and nothing else. We need to get this idea thoroughly into our minds. The general design of the sinner being always self-gratification, and it making very little if any difference in his guilt what form of self-gratification he chooses, it follows that the measure of guilt cannot be sought here, and must therefore be sought elsewhere.

8. But it is time I should state, positively, that guilt is always to be estimated by the degree of light under which the sinful intention is formed, or in other words, it is to be measured by the mind's knowledge or perception of the value of that end which the law requires to be chosen. This end is the highest well-being of God and of the universe. This is of infinite value; and in some sense every moral agent must know it to be of infinite value, and yet individuals may differ indefinitely in respect to the degree of clearness with which this great end is apprehended by the mind. Choosing this end -- the highest well-being of God and of the universe -- always implies the rejection of self-interest as an end; and on the other hand, the choice of self-interest or self-gratification as an end always and necessarily implies the rejection of the highest well-being of God and of the universe as an end. The choice of either implies the rejection of its opposite.

Now the sinfulness of a selfish choice consists not merely in its choice of good to self, but in its implying a rejection of the highest well-being of God and of the universe as a supreme and ultimate end. If selfishness did not imply the apprehension and rejection of other and higher interests as an end, it would not imply any guilt at all. The value of the interests rejected is that in which the guilt consists. In others words, the guilt consists in rejecting the infinitely valuable well-being of God and of the universe for the sake of selfish gratification.

Now it is plain that the amount of guilt is as the mind's apprehension of the value of the interests rejected. In some sense, as I have said, every moral agent has and must of necessity have the idea that the interests of God and of the universe are of infinite value. He has this idea, developed so clearly that every sin he commits deserves endless punishment, and yet the degree of his guilt may be greatly enhanced by additional light, so that he may deserve punishment not only endless in duration but indefinitely great in degree. Nor is there any contradiction in this. If the sinner cannot affirm that there is any limit to the value of the interests he refuses to will and to pursue, he cannot of course affirm that there is any limit to his guilt and desert of punishment. This is true and must be true of every sin and of every sinner; and yet as light increases and the mind gains a clearer apprehension of the infinite value of the highest well-being of God and of the universe, just in that proportion does the guilt of sin increase. Hence the measure of knowledge possessed of duty and its motives, is always and unalterably the rule by which guilt is to be measured.

The proof of this is twofold.

1. The Scriptures assume and affirm it.

The text affords a plain instance. The apostle alludes to those past ages when the heathen nations had no written revelation of God, and remarks that "those times of ignorance God winked at." This does not mean that God connived at their sin because of their darkness, but does mean that he passed over it with comparatively slight notice, regarding it as sin of far less aggravation than those which men would now commit if they turned away when God commanded them all to repent. True, sin is never absolutely a light thing; but comparatively, some sins incur small guilt when compared with the great guilt of other sins. This is implied in our text.

I next cite James 4:17. "To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." This plainly implies that knowledge is indispensable to moral obligation; and even more than this is implied; namely, that the guilt of any sinner is always equal to the amount of his knowledge on the subject. It always corresponds to the mind's perception of the value of the end which should have been chosen, but is rejected. If a man knows he ought in any given case to do good, and yet does not do it, to him this is sin -- the sin plainly lying in the fact of not doing good when he knew he could do it, and being measured as to its guilt by the degree of that knowledge.

John 9:41 -- "Jesus said unto them, if ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, we see; therefore your sin remaineth." Here Christ asserts that men without knowledge would be without sin; and that men who have knowledge, and sin notwithstanding, are held guilty. This plainly affirms that the presence of light or knowledge is requisite to the existence of sin, and obviously implies that the amount of knowledge possessed is the measure of the guilt of sin.

It is remarkable that the Bible everywhere assumes first truths. It does not stop to prove them, or even assert them -- it always assumes their truth, and seems to assume that every one knows and will admit them. As I have been recently writing on moral government and studying the Bible as to its teachings on

this class of subjects, I have been often struck with this remarkable fact.

John 15:22, 24 -- "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sins. He that hateth me, hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hateth both me and my Father." Christ holds the same doctrine here as in the last passage cited -- light essential to constitute sin, and the degree of light, constituting the measure of its aggravation. Let it be observed, however, that Christ probably did not mean to affirm in the absolute sense that if he had not come, the Jews would have had no sin; for they would have had some light if he had not come. He speaks as I suppose comparatively. Their sin if he had not come would have been so much less as to justify his strong language.

Luke 12:47, 48 -- "And that servant which knew his Lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more."

Here we have the doctrine laid down and the truth assumed that men shall be punished according to knowledge. To whom much light is given, of him shall much obedience be required. This is precisely the principle that God requires of men according to the light they have.

1 Tim. 1:13 -- "Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief." Paul had done things intrinsically as bad as well they could be; yet his guilt was far less because he did them under the darkness of unbelief; hence he obtained mercy, when otherwise, he might not. The plain assumption is that his ignorance abated from the malignity of his sin, and favoured his obtaining mercy.

In another passage (Acts 26:9), Paul says of himself -- "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." This had everything to do with the degree of his guilt in rejecting the Messiah, and also with his obtaining pardon.

Luke 23:34 -- "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." This passage presents to us the suffering Jesus, surrounded with Roman soldiers and malicious scribes and priests, yet pouring out his prayer for them, and making the only plea in their behalf which could be made -- "for they know not what they do." This does not imply that they had no guilt, for if that were true they would not have needed forgiveness; but it did imply that their guilt was greatly palliated by their ignorance. If they had known him to be the Messiah, their guilt might have been unpardonable.

Matt. 11:20-24 -- "Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not. Woe unto thee, Chorazine, woe 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." But why does Christ thus upbraid these cities? Why denounce so fearful a woe on Chorazin and Capernaum? Because most of his mighty works had been wrought there. His oft-repeated miracles which proved him the Messiah had been wrought before their eyes. Among them he had taught daily, and in their synagogues every Sabbath day. They had great light; hence their great --

their unsurpassed guilt. Not even the men of Sodom had guilt to compare with theirs. The city most exalted, even as it were to heaven, must be brought down to the deepest hell. Guilt and punishment, evermore, according to light enjoyed but resisted.

Luke 11:47-51 -- "Woe unto you! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. Truly ye bear witness that ye allow the deeds of your fathers: for they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchres. Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they shall slay and persecute: that the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation. From the blood of Abel, unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation." Now here, I ask, on what principle was it that all the blood of martyred prophets ever since the world began was required of that generation? Because they deserved it; for God does no such thing as injustice. It never was known that He punished any people or any individual beyond their desert.

But why and how did they deserve this fearful and augmented visitation of the wrath of God for past centuries of persecution?

The answer is twofold: they sinned against accumulated light: and they virtually endorsed all the persecuting deeds of their fathers, and concurred most heartily in their guilt. They had all the oracles of God. The whole history of the nation lay in their hands. They knew the blameless and holy character of those prophets who had been martyred; they could read the guilt of their persecutors and murderers. Yet under all this light, themselves go straight on and perpetrate deeds of the same sort, but of far deeper malignity.

Again, in doing this they virtually endorse all that their fathers did. Their conduct towards the Man of Nazareth, put into words would read thus, "The holy men whom God sent to teach and rebuke our fathers, they maliciously traduced and put to death; they did right, and we will do the same thing towards Christ." Now it was not possible for them to give a more decided sanction to the bloody deeds of their fathers. They underwrote for every crime -- assume upon their own consciences all the guilt of their fathers. In intention, they do those deeds over again. They say, "If we had lived then we should have done and sanctioned all they did."

On the same principle the accumulated guilt of all the blood and miseries of slavery since the world began rests on this nation now. The guilt involved in every pang, every tear, every blood-drop forced out by the knotted scourge -- all lies at the door of this generation. Why? Because the history of all the past is before the pro-slavery men of this generation, and they endorse the whole by persisting in the practice of the same system and of the same wrongs. No generation before us ever had the light on the evils and the wrongs of Slavery that we have; hence our guilt exceeds that of any former generation of slave-holders; and, moreover, knowing all the cruel wrongs and miseries of the system from the history of the past, every persisting slave-holder endorses all the crimes and assumes all the guilt involved in the system and evolved out of it since the world began.

Rom. 7:13 -- "Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, worketh death in me by that which is good, that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful." The last clause of this verse brings out clearly the principle that under the light which the commandment, that is, the law, affords, sin becomes exceedingly guilty. This is the very principle, which, we have seen, is so clearly taught and implied in numerous passages of Scripture.

The diligent reader of the Bible knows that these are only a part of the texts which teach the same doctrine; we need not adduce any more.

2. I remark that this is the rule and the only just rule by which the guilt of sin can be measured. If I had time to turn the subject over and over -- time to take up every other conceivable supposition -- I could show that none of them can possibly be true. No supposition can abide a close examination except this, that the rule or measure of guilt is the mind's knowledge pertaining to the value of the end to be chosen.

There can be no other criterion by which guilt can be measured. It is the value of the end chosen which constitutes sin guilty, and the mind's estimate of that value measures its own guilt. This is true according to the Bible as we have seen; and every man needs only consult his own consciousness faithfully and he will see that it is equally affirmed by the mind's own intuition to be right.

A few inferences may be drawn from our doctrine.

1. Guilt is not to be measured by the nature of the intention; for sinful intention is always a unit -- always one and the same thing -- being nothing more nor less than self-gratification.

2. Nor can it be measured by the particular type of self-gratification which the mind may prefer. No matter which of his numerous appetites or propensities man may choose to indulge -- whether for food, for strong drink -- for power, pleasure or gain -- it is the same thing in the end -- self-gratification, and nothing else. For the sake of this he sacrifices every other conflicting interest, and herein lies his guilt. Yet since he tramples on the greater good of others with equal recklessness, whatever type of self-gratification he prefers, it is plain that we cannot find in this type any true measure of his guilt.

3. Nor again is the guilt to be decided by the amount of evil which the sin may bring into the universe. An agent not enlightened may introduce great evil and yet no guilt attach to this agent. This is true of evil often done by brute animals. It is true of the mischiefs effected by alcohol. In fact it matters not how much or how little evil may result from the misdeeds of a moral agent, you cannot determine the amount of his guilt from this circumstance. God may overrule the greatest sin so that but little evil shall result from it, or he may leave its tendencies uncounteracted so that great evils shall result from the least sin. Who can tell how much or how little overruling agency may interpose between any sin great or small and its legitimate results?

Satan sinned in betraying Judas, and Judas sinned in betraying Christ. Yet God so overruled these sins that most blessed results to the universe followed from Christ's betrayal and consequent death. Shall the sins of Satan and Judas be estimated by the evils actually resulting from them? If it should appear that the good immensely overbalanced the evil, does their sin thereby become holiness -- meritorious holiness? Is their guilt at all the less for God's wisdom and love in overruling it for good? It is not therefore the amount of resulting good or evil which determines the amount of guilt, but is the degree of light enjoyed, under which the sin is committed.

4. Nor again can guilt be measured by the common opinions of men. Men associated in society are wont to form among themselves a sort of public sentiment which becomes a standard for estimating guilt; yet how often is it erroneous? Christ warns us against adopting this standard, and also against ever judging according to the outward appearance. Who does not know that the common opinions of men are exceedingly incorrect? It is indeed wonderful to see how far they diverge in all directions from the Bible standard.

5. The amount of guilt can be determined, as I have said, only by the degree in which those ideas are developed which throw light upon obligation. Just here sin lies, in resisting the light and acting in opposition to it, and therefore the degree of light should naturally measure the amount of guilt incurred.

REMARKS.

1. We see from this subject the principle on which many passages of Scripture are to be explained. It might seem strange that Christ should charge the blood of all the martyred prophets of past ages on that generation. But the subject before us reveals the principle upon which this is done and ought to be done.

Whatever of apparent mystery may attach to the fact declared in our text, "The times of this ignorance God winked at" -- finds in our subject an adequate explanation. Does it seem strange that for ages God should pass over almost without apparent notice the monstrous and reeking abominations of the Heathen world? The reason is found in their ignorance. Therefore God winks at those odious and cruel idolatries. For all, taken together, are a trifle compared with the guilt of a single generation of enlightened men.

2. One sinner may be in such circumstances as to have more light and knowledge than the whole Heathen world. Alas! how little the Heathen know! How little compared with what is known by sinners in this land, even by very young sinners!

Let me call up and question some impenitent sinner of Oberlin. It matters but little who -- let it be any Sabbath-school child.

What do you know about God?

I know that there is one God and only one. The Heathen believe there are hundreds of thousands.

What do you know about this God?

I know that he is infinitely great and good. But the Heathen thinks some of his gods are both mean and mischievous -- wicked as can be and the very patrons of wickedness among men.

What do you know about salvation?

I know that God so loved the world as to give his only begotten Son to die that whosoever would believe in him might live for ever. Oh! the Heathen never heard of that. They would faint away methinks in amazement if they should hear and really believe the startling, glorious fact. And that Sabbath-school child knows that God gives his Spirit to convince of sin. He has perhaps often been sensible of the presence and power of that Spirit. But the Heathen know nothing of this.

You too know that you are immortal -- that beyond death there is still a conscious unchanging state of existence, blissful or wretched according to the deeds done here. But the Heathen have no just ideas on this subject. It is to them as if all were a blank.

The amount of it then is that you know everything -- the Heathen almost nothing. You know all you need to know to be saved, to be useful -- to honour God and serve your generation according to his will. The Heathen sit in deep darkness, wedded to their abominations, groping, yet finding nothing.

As your light therefore, so is your guilt immeasurably greater than theirs. Be it so that their idolatries are monstrous -- your guilt in your impenitence under the light you have is vastly more so. See that Heathen

mother dragging her shrieking child and tumbling it into the Ganges! See her rush with another to throw him into the burning arms of Moloch. Mark: see that pile of wood flashing, lifting up its lurid flames toward heaven. Those men are dragging a dead husband -- they heave his senseless corpse upon that burning pile. There comes the widow -- her hair disheveled and flying -- gaily festooned for such a sacrifice; she dances on; she rends the air with her howls and her wailings; she shrinks and yet she does not shrink -- she leaps on the pile, and the din of music with the yell of spectators buries her shrieks of agony; she is gone! Oh! my blood curdles and runs cold in my veins; my hair stands on end; I am horrified with such scenes -- but what shall we say of their guilt? Ah yes! what do they know of God -- of worship -- of the claims of God upon their heart and life? Ah! you may well spare your censure of the Heathen for their fearful orgies of cruelty and lust, and give it where light has been enjoyed and resisted.

3. You see then that often a sinner in some of our congregations may know more than all the Heathen world know. If this be true, what follows from it as to the amount of his comparative guilt? This inevitably, that such a sinner deserves a direr and deeper damnation than all the Heathen world! This conclusion may seem startling; but how can we escape from it? We cannot escape. It is as plain as any mathematical demonstration. This is the principle asserted by Christ when he said, "That servant which knew his Lord's will and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes; but he that knew not and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes." How solemn and how pungent the application of this doctrine would be in this congregation! I could call out many a sinner in this place and show him that beyond question his guilt is greater than that of all the Heathen world. Yet how few ever estimated their own guilt thus.

Not long since an ungodly young man, trained in this country, wrote back from the Sandwich Islands a glowing and perhaps a just description of their horrible abominations, moralizing on their monstrous enormities and thanking God that he had been born and taught in a Christian land. Indeed! he might well have spared this censure of the dark-minded Heathen. His own guilt in remaining an impenitent sinner under all the light of Christian America was greater than the whole aggregate guilt of all those Islands.

So we may all well spare our expressions of abhorrence at the guilty abominations of idolatry. You are often perhaps saying in your heart, why does God endure these horrid abominations another day? See that rolling car of juggernaut. Its wheels move axle deep in the gushing blood and crushed bones of its deluded worshippers! And yet God looks on and no red bolt leaps from his right hand to smite such wickedness. They are indeed guilty; but Oh, how small their guilt compared with the guilt of those who know their duty perfectly, yet never do it! God sees their horrible abominations, yet does he wink at them because they are done in so much ignorance

But see that impenitent sinner. Convicted of his sin under the clear gospel light that shines all around him, he is driven to pray. He knows he ought to repent, and almost thinks he wants to, and will try. Yet still he clings to his sins, and will not give up his heart to God. Still he holds his heart in a state of impenitence. Now mark here; his sin in thus withholding his heart from God under so much light, involves greater guilt than all the abominations of the Heathen world. Put together the guilt of all those widows who immolate themselves on the funeral pile -- of those who hurl their children into the Ganges, or into the burning arms of Moloch -- all does not begin to approach the guilt of that convicted sinner's prayer who comes before God under the pressure of his conscience, and prays a heartless prayer, determined all the while to withhold his heart from God. Oh! why does this sinner thus tempt God, and thus abuse his love, and thus trample on his known authority? Oh! that moment of impenitence, while his prayers are forced by conscience from his burning lips, and yet he will not yield the controversy with his Maker -- that moment

involves direr guilt than rests on all the Heathen world together! He knows more than they all, yet sins despite of all his knowledge. The many stripes belong to him -- the few to them.

4. This leads me to remark again, that the Christian world may very well spare their revilings and condemnations of the Heathen. Of all the portions of earth's population, Christendom is infinitely the most guilty Christendom, where the gospels peal from ten thousand pulpits -- where its praises are sung by a thousand choirs, but where many thousand hearts that know God and duty, refuse either to reverence the one or perform the other! All the abominations of the Heathen world are a mere trifle compared with the guilt of Christendom. We may look down upon the filth and meanness and degradation of a Heathen people, and feel a most polite disgust at the spectacle -- and far be it from me, to excuse these degrading, filthy or cruel practices; but how small their light, and consequently their guilt, compared with our own! We therefore ask the Christian world to turn away from the spectacle of Heathen degradation, and look nearer home, upon the spectacle of Christian guilt! Let us look upon ourselves.

5. Again, let us fear not to say what you must all see to be true, that the nominal church is the most guilty part of Christendom. It cannot for a moment be questioned, that the church has more light than any other portion; therefore has she more guilt. Of course I speak of the nominal church -- not the real church whom he has pardoned and cleansed from her sins. But in the nominal church, think of the sins that live and riot in their corruption. See that backslider? He has tasted the waters of life. He has been greatly enlightened. Perhaps he has really known the Lord by true faith -- and then see, he turns away to beg the husks of earthly pleasure! He turns his back on the bleeding Lamb! Now, put together all the guilt of every Heathen soul that has gone to hell -- of every soul that has gone from a state of utter moral darkness, and your guilt, backsliding Christian, is greater than all theirs!

Do you, therefore, say, may God then, have mercy on my soul? So say we all; but we must add if it be possible; for who can say that such guilt as yours can be forgiven! Can Christ pray for you as he prayed for his murderers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do?" Can he plead in your behalf, that you knew not what you were doing? Awful! awful! Where is the sounding line that shall measure the ocean-depth of your guilt?

6. Again, if our children remain in sin, we may cease to congratulate ourselves that they were not born in Heathenism or slavery! How often have I done this! How often, as I have looked upon my sons and daughters, have I thanked God that they were not born to be thrown into the burning arms of a Moloch, or to be crushed under the wheels of juggernaut! But if they will live in sin, we must suspend our self-congratulations for their having Christian light and privileges. If they will not repent, it were infinitely better for them to have been born in the thickest Pagan darkness -- better to have been thrown in their tender years into the Ganges, or into the fires which idolatry kindles -- better be anything else, or suffer anything earthly, than have the gospel's light only to shut it out and go to hell despite of its admonitions.

Let us not, then, be hasty in congratulating ourselves, as if this great light enjoyed by us and by our children, were of course a certain good to them; but this we may do -- we may rejoice that God will honour himself -- his mercy if he can, and his justice if he must. God will be honoured, and we may glory in this. But Oh, the sinner, the sinner! Who can measure the depth of his guilt, or the terror of his final doom! It will be more tolerable for all the Heathen world together than for you.

7. It is time that we all understood this subject fully, and appreciated all its bearings. It is no doubt true, that however moral our children may be, they are more guilty than any other sinners under heaven, if they live

in sin, and will not yield to the light under which they live. We may be perhaps congratulating ourselves on their fair morality; but if we saw their case in all its real bearings, our souls would groan with agony -- our bowels would be all liquid with anguish -- our very hearts within us would heave as if volcanic fires were kindled there -- so deep a sense should we have of their fearful guilt and of the awful doom they incur in denying the Lord that bought them and setting at naught a known salvation. Oh! if we ever pray, we should pour out our prayers for our offspring as if nothing could ever satisfy us or stay our importunity, but the blessings of a full salvation realised in their souls.

Let the mind contemplate the guilt of these children. I could not find a Sabbath-school child, perhaps not one in all Christendom, who could not tell me more of God's salvation than all the Heathen world know. That dear little boy who comes from his Sabbath school knows all about the gospel. He is almost ready to be converted, but not quite ready; yet that little boy, if he knows his duty and yet will not do it, is covered with more guilt than all the Heathen world together. Yes, that boy, who goes alone and prays, yet holds back his heart from God, and then his mother comes and prays over him, and pours her tears on his head, and his little heart almost melts, and he seems on the very point of giving up his whole heart to the Saviour; yet if he will not do it, he commits more sin in that refusal than all the sin of all the Heathen world -- his guilt is more than the guilt of all the murders, all the drownings of children, and burnings of widows, and deeds of cruelty and violence in all the Heathen world. All this combination of guilt shall not be equal to the guilt of the lad who knows his duty, but will not yield his heart to its righteous claims.

8. "The Heathen," says an apostle, "sin without law, and shall therefore perish, without law." In their final doom they will be cast away from God; this will be perhaps about all. The bitter reflection, "I had the light of the gospel and would not yield to it. I knew all my duty, yet did not" this cannot be a part of their eternal doom. This is reserved for those who gather themselves into our sanctuaries and around our family altars, yet will not serve their own Infinite Father.

9. One more remark. Suppose I should call out a sinner by name -- one of the sinners of this congregation, a son of pious parents -- and should call up the father also. I might say, Is this your son? Yes. What testimony can you bear about this son of yours? I have endeavoured to teach him all the ways of the Lord. Son, what can you say? I know my duty. I have heard it a thousand times. I know I ought to repent, but I never would.

Oh! if we understood this matter in all its bearings, it would fill every bosom with consternation and grief. How would our bowels hum and heave as a volcano! There would be one universal outcry of anguish and terror at the awful guilt and fearful doom of such a sinner!

Young man, are you going away this day in your sins? Then, what angel can compute your guilt? Oh! how long has Jesus held out his hands, yes, his bleeding hands, and besought you to look and live! A thousand times, and in countless varied ways has he called, but you have refused; stretched out his hands, and you have not regarded. Oh! why will you not repent? Why not say at once, It is enough that I have sinned so long! I cannot live so any longer! O sinner, why will you live so? Would you go down to hell -- ah, to the deepest hell -- where, if we would find you, we must work our way down a thousand years through ranks of lost spirits less guilty than you, ere we could reach the fearful depth to which you have sunk? O sinner, what a hell is that which can adequately punish such guilt as thine!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/the-rule-by-which-guilt-of-sin-is-estimated/>

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