

# The Salvation of Sinners Impossible

by Charles Finney

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*The salvation of the wicked is impossible because God cannot persuade them to desist from sinning, and salvation from sin is an indispensable condition of salvation from hell.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 25:32, 1 Peter 4:18

**Topics:** "Repentance", "Salvation"

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## Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the impossibility of salvation for sinners, arguing that while the righteous face difficulties in their salvation, the wicked are unable to cease from sinning and accept God's grace. He explains that God's efforts to persuade sinners are often met with resistance, and that true salvation requires a transformation of heart that they refuse to undergo. Finney warns that without repentance and a change in character, sinners cannot enter heaven, as their unholy state would disrupt the peace of the heavenly realm. Ultimately, he concludes that those who remain unrepentant will face eternal separation from God and be consigned to judgment alongside the damned.

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## Transcript

"If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" -- 1 Peter 4:18.

I SAID in a former sermon, that the doctrine of the text is that the salvation of the righteous is difficult and that of the sinner impossible. In that sermon I discussed at length the first part of this subject, showing how and why the salvation of the righteous is difficult. I am now to take up the remaining part and show how and why the salvation of the wicked is impossible.

Here let me premise in general that by the righteous is not meant those who have never sinned. It could not be difficult to save such as had not sinned against God. They are, in fact, already saved. But these righteous ones are those, who, having been sinners, now come to exercise faith in Christ, and of course become "heirs of that righteousness which is by faith." Vitally important to be considered here is the fact that the governmental difficulty in the way of being saved, growing out of your having sinned, even greatly, is all removed by Christ's atonement. No matter now how great your guilt, if you will only have faith in Jesus, and accept of his atonement as the ground of pardon for your sins.

Hence the difficulty in the way of saving sinners is not simply that they have sinned, but that they will not now cease from sinning and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The salvation of sinners is therefore impossible.

1. Because it is impossible for God by any means he can wisely employ, to persuade them to desist from sinning. They are so wicked and so perverse that they abuse to greater sin the very best means God employs to bring them to repentance. Hence God cannot wisely save them.

When I say it is impossible for God to convert them, I do not imply that God lacks physical power to do anything which is the proper subject of such power. On this point there can be no question. But how can physical omnipotence be brought to bear directly upon mind and upon the heart?

Again, let us consider, that it may not be wise for God to bring all the moral power of his universe to bear upon the sinner in this world. If this were wise and practicable, it might avail -- for aught we can know; but since he does not do it, we infer that he refrains for some wise reason.

Certain limitations are fixed in the divine wisdom to the amount of moral influence which God shall employ in the case of a sinner. It is in view of this fact that I say, God finds it impossible to gain the sinner's consent to the gospel by any means that he can wisely employ. He goes as far as is really wise and as far as is on the whole good. This is undoubtedly the fact in the case. Yet all this does not avail. Hence it becomes impossible that the sinner should be saved.

2. Again, the sinner cannot be saved, because salvation from sin is an indispensable condition of salvation from hell. The being saved from sin must come first in order. Every sinner knows, and on reflection and self-inspection he must see, that his state of mind is such that he cannot respect himself. The elements of blessedness are not therefore in him, and cannot be until he meets the demands of his own moral nature.

He knows, also, that he does not want to have anything to do with God -- is afraid of God -- both dreads and hates his presence -- is afraid to die and go so near to God as death bears all men. He knows that all his relations to God are unpleasant in the extreme. How certainly, then, may he know that he is utterly unprepared for heaven.

Now the sinner must be saved from this guilty and abominable state of mind. No change is needed in God -- neither in his character, government, or position towards sin; but the utmost possible change and all the needed change is requisite on the part of the sinner. If salvation implies fitness for heaven, and if this implies ceasing from sin, then, of course, it is naturally and for ever impossible that any sinner can be saved without holiness.

3. The peace of heaven forbids that you should go there in your sins. I know you think of going to heaven; you rather expect you shall go there at last; your parents are there, as you hope and believe, and for this reason you the more want to go, that you may behold them in their glory. Oh, say you, should I not like to be where my father and mother are? And do you think you can follow them, in your sins? What could you do in heaven if you were there? What could you say? What kind of songs could you sing there? What sort of happiness, congenial to your heart, could you hope to find there?

Your pious mother in heaven -- oh, how changed -- you heard her last words on earth for they were words of prayer for your poor guilty soul; but now she shines and sings above, all holy and pure. What sympathy could there be between you and her in heaven? Remember what Christ said when some one told him that his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to see him. "Who," said he, "is my mother? and who are my brethren? He that doeth the will of my Father, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." The

law of sympathy, therefore, in heaven turns not on earthly relationship, but on oneness of heart -- on the common and mutual spirit of love and obedience towards their great common Father.

Do you then expect that your mother would be glad to see you -- that she would spread her mantle over you and take you up to heaven? Oh, if she were told that you were at the gate, she would hasten down to say, O my sinning child! you cannot enter heaven. Into this holy place nothing can by any means enter that "worketh abomination or maketh a lie." You cannot -- no, you cannot come!

If it were left to your own mother to decide the question of your admission, you could not come in. She would not open heaven's gate for your admission. She knows you would disturb the bliss of heaven. She knows you would mar its purity and be an element of discord in its sympathies and in its songs.

You know it need not have been so. You might have given your heart to God in season, and then he would have shed his love abroad in your soul, and given you the Holy Ghost, and made you ripe for heaven. But you would not. All was done for you that God could wisely do; all that Christ could do; all that the spirit of God could consistently do. But all was vain: all came to naught and availed nothing, because you would not forego your sins -- would not renounce them, even for everlasting life. And now will heaven let you in? No. Nothing that worketh abomination can by any means go in there.

4. Besides, it would not be for your own comfort to be there. You were never quite comfortable in spiritual society on earth; in the prayer-meeting you were unhappy. As one individual said here: "Oh, what a place this is! I cannot go across the street without being spoken to about my soul. How can I live here?"

Let me tell you, it will be just as bad, nay, much worse, for you in heaven. That can be no place for you, sinner, since you hate, worst of all things on earth, those places and scenes which are most like heaven.

5. The justice of God will not allow you to participate in the joys of the saints. His relations to the universe make it indispensable that he should protect his saints from such society as you. They have had their discipline of trial in such society long enough: the scenes of their eternal reward will bring everlasting relief from this torture of their holy sympathies. Oh, how will God, their Infinite Father, throw around them the shield of his protection upon the mountains of paradise, that lift their heads eternally under the sunlight of his glory!

His sense of propriety forbids that he should give you a place among his pure and trustful children. It would be so unfitting -- so unsuitable! It would throw such discord into the sweet songs and sympathies of the holy!

Besides, as already hinted, it could be no kindness to you. It could not soothe, but only chafe and fret your spirit. Oh, if you were obliged to be there, how would it torment and irritate your soul!

If, then, the sinner cannot be saved and go to heaven, where shall he appear?

The question is a strong negation. They shall not appear among the righteous and the saved. This is a common form of speaking. Nehemiah said, "Shall such a man as I flee?" No, indeed. This form of question is one of the strongest forms of negation that can be expressed in our language.

Where, then, shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? In no desirable place or position certainly. Not with the righteous in the judgment, for so God's word has often and most solemnly affirmed. Christ himself affirms that, when all nations shall be gathered before him for judgment, he will separate them, one from

another, as a shepherd divideth the sheep from the goats. This separation, as the description shows, brings the righteous on the right hand and the wicked on the left. And it should be considered that this statement is made by Christ himself, and that if any being in the universe knows, it must be he to whom is "given authority to execute judgment." He says he will separate them one from another according not to their national relations, or their family connections, but according to their character as friends or enemies to God.

Oh, what a separation must this be in families and among dear earthly friends! On this side will be a husband -- on that a wife; here a brother and there a sister; here one of two friends and there the other -- parted for ever -- for ever! If this great division were to be struck between you today according to present character, how fearful the line of separation it would draw! Ask yourselves where it would pass through your own families and among the friends you love. How would it divide College classes -- and oh, how would it smite many hearts with terror and consternation!

It is asked, where shall the ungodly appear? I answer, certainly not in heaven, nor on the heavenly side. But they must be in the judgment, for God has said, he would bring all the race into judgment, and every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. All are to be there, but some are on the right hand and some on the left.

The ungodly and the sinner will appear in that day among the damned -- among lost angels, doomed to the place prepared of old for their eternal abode. So Jesus has himself told us. The very words of their sentence are on record: "Then will he say to them on his left hand, Depart, from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." This is indeed the only place for which they are prepared; and this the only society to which their hearts are congenial. They have of choice belonged to Satan's government on earth: at least, in the sense of doing precisely what he would have them do. Now, therefore, after such a training in selfishness and sin, they are manifestly fit for no other and better society than that of Satan and his angels.

Let it not surprise any of you to be told that the amiable sinners of earth are preparing themselves -- (remaining enemies to God and radically selfish) -- for the society of the arch spirit of evil. Just observe what restraints are thrown around sinners here. Mark how obviously they feel restrained, and show that they are restive and ill at ease. It may be read out of their very hearts that they would be glad to be vastly more wicked and selfish, that is, in their external life -- if they might. It is wonderful to see in how many ways God's providence has walled around the sinner's pathway and hedged him in from outbreking sin.

But let these walls be torn away; let all regard to his reputation among the good perish for ever from his soul; let despair of ever gaining God's favour take full possession of his heart, and rivet its iron grasp upon him, then what will he become? Take away all the restraints of civil society -- of laws and customs -- of Christian example, and of Christian society; let there be no more prayer made for him by pitying Christian friends, no more counsel given, or entreaty used to persuade him towards the good, then tell me, where is the sinner? How terribly will sin work out its dreadful power to corrupt and madden the soul! Bring together myriads of desperate wretches, in the madness of their despair and rage and wrath against God and all the good, and Oh what a fearful world would they make! What can be conceived more awful! Yet this is the very world for which sinners are now preparing, and the only one for which they will be found in the judgment to be prepared.

As this is the only world for which the sinner is prepared, so is it the only one which is appropriate and fitting, the case being viewed in respect to his influence for mischief. Here only, here in this prison-house of woe and despair, can sinners be effectually prevented from doing any further mischief in God's kingdom. Here they are cut off from all possibility of doing any more harm in God's universe.

In this earthly state one sinner destroys much good each and every sinner does much evil. God looks on, not unconcerned, but with amazing patience. He suffers a great deal of evil to be done, for the sake of securing an opportunity to try the power of forbearance and love upon the sinner's heart. You are abusing his love and defeating all its kind designs, but still God waits, till the point is reached where forbearance ceases to be virtue. Beyond this point, how can God wait longer?

Here you find ample room for doing mischief. Many are around you whom you influence to evil and urge on towards hell. Some of them would be converted but for your influence to hold them back and ensnare their souls. If this were the place, I could name and call out some of you who are exerting a deadly influence upon your associates. Ah, to think of the souls you may ruin for ever! God sees them, and sees how you are playing into the devil's hands to drag them down with you to an eternal hell. But ere long he will take you away from this sphere of doing evil. He will for ever cut off your connection with those who can be influenced to evil, and leave around you only those associates who are ruined, despairing, and maddened in sin, like yourself. There he will lock you up, throw away the key, and let you rave on, and swear on, and curse on, and madden your guilty soul more and more for ever! Oh! what inmates are those in this prison-house of the guilty and the lost! Why should not God fit up such a place for such beings, so lost to all good, and so given up to all the madness and guilt of rebellion?

There alone can sinners be made useful. They refused to make themselves useful by their voluntary agency on earth; now God will make use of them in hell for some good. Do you ask me if I talk about sin being made useful? Yes, to be sure I do. God never permits anything to occur in his universe but he extracts some good from it, overruling its influence, or making the correction and punishment of it a means of good. This is a great consolation to the holy, that no sinner can exist from whom God will not bring out some good. This principle is partially developed in society here, under civil government. The gallows is not the greatest evil in the world, nor the most unmixed evil. Murder is much worse. States' prisons are not the greatest earthly evils. Government can make great use of those men who will not obey law. It can make them examples and lift them up as beacons of warning, to show the evil of disobeying wholesome laws. A great many men have had strong and useful impressions made on their minds, as, riding through Auburn on the railroad, they have marked those lofty frowning walls and battlements which enclose and guard the culprits immured within. Many a hard heart has quailed before those walls, and the terrors of those cells behind. If the outside view does not avail to awe the spirit of transgression, give them the inside view and some of its heart-desolating experience. These things do good. They tame the passion for evil-doing, and impress a salutary fear on the hardened and reckless. If so under all the imperfections of human government, how much more under the perfect administration of the divine!

God cannot afford to lose your influence in his universe. He will rejoice to use you for the glory of his mercy, if you will; Oh yes! He will put away your sins far as the East is from the West, and will put a robe of beauty and glory upon you, and a sweet harp in your hands, and a song of praise on your lips, and the melody of heaven's love in your heart, all these, if you will. But if you will not, then he has other attributes besides mercy that need to be illustrated. Justice will come in for its claim, and to illustrate this he will make you an example of the bitter misery of sinning. He will put you deep in hell; and the holy, beholding you there, will see that God's kingdom is safe and pure, and in their everlasting song they will shout,

"Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thy judgments are made manifest."

This is the only way in which God can make you useful in his kingdom, if you will not repent. He has tried every means of bringing you to repentance, but all in vain; he cannot get your consent. Of course there is no alternative but to make you an example to deter all other moral agents from sinning.

There is no other way for God to meet the demands of the public weal, but to make you an example to show his abhorrence of sin. God is most thoroughly economical of his resources. He husbands everything to the very best account. Everything must, under his hand, be made conducive in some way to the general good. Even of your misery he will be as economical as he can, and will carefully turn it all to the very best account. Every groan and every throb and pang of your agonised soul will be turned to use. Yes, rely upon it; all this agony, which does you no good, but is to you only unmingled and unalleviated woe, will be a warning beacon, under God's hand, crying out in tones of thunder, Stand away! stand away! lest you come into this place of torment; stand afar from sin -- fear this awful sin -- watch against it, for it is an awful thing to sin against Jehovah. I have tried it and here I am in woe unutterable! Oh what a testimony, when all hell shall roll up one mighty accumulated groan! a groan whose awful voice shall be, Stand in awe and sin not, for God is terrible in his judgments upon the guilty.

O sinner, think of it. God wants you now to cry out to every fellow-sinner, and warn him away from the brink of hell. Will you do it? What are you in fact doing? Are you preparing yourself to go out as a missionary of light and love and mercy to the benighted? Are you pluming your wings, as an angel of mercy, to bear the messages of salvation? Oh no! you refuse to do this, or anything of the sort. You disdain to preach such a gospel and to preach it so! But God will make you preach it in another way; for, as I said, he is thoroughly economical of the resources of his kingdom, and all must do something in some way for his glory. He will have everything preach -- saints preach and sinners preach; yea, sinners in hell must preach for God and for his truth. He will make your very groans and tears -- those "tears that ever fall, but not in Mercy's sight" they will preach, and will tell over and over the dreadful story of mercy abused and sin persisted in, and waxing worse and worse, till the bolts of vengeance broke at last upon your guilty head! Over and over will those groans, and tears repeat the fearful story, so that when the angels shall come from the remotest regions of the universe, they shall cry out, What is here? What mean those groans? What mean those flames, wreathing around their miserable victims? Ah! the story told then will make them cry aloud, Why will God's creatures sin against his throne? Can there be such madness in beings gifted with reason's light?

These angels know that the only thing that can secure public confidence in a ruler is fidelity in the execution of his law. Hence it is to them no wonder that, there being sin to punish, God should punish it with most exemplary severity. They expect this and seeing its awful demonstrations before their eyes only serves to impress the more deeply on their souls the holiness and justice of the great and blessed God.

#### REMARKS.

1. From this standpoint we can easily see what we are to understand by the doctrine of election -- a doctrine often misstated, and often perverted to a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence. The simple and plain view of it is, that God, foreseeing all the future of your existence as perfectly as if all were in fact present, determined to deal with you according to your voluntary course; determined to offer you the gospel, and, on your refusal of it, to give you over to the doom of those who deny the Lord that bought

them. Election is no new or different plan of divine administration, aside from and unlike what the Bible reveals as the plan of saving men through the gospel. It is this very plan of which the Bible is full, only that it contemplates this plan as framed by the divine Mind "before the world began."

2. If you will now consent to give your heart to God, you can be saved. No election will hinder you. The doctrine of election is simply the fact that God sends forth his Spirit to save as many as by the best system of influences he wisely can save; and surely this never can hinder any sinner from repenting and gaining salvation, for the very good reason that this plan contemplates saving and not damning men, as its object, and is in fact the sinner's only hope.

Come then, repent and believe the gospel, if you would be saved. No election will hinder you, and neither will it save you without your own repentance unto life.

How then shall the case turn with you? Almost all who are ever converted are brought in, early in life. Not one in a hundred is converted after the age of forty. The old among the converts are always few -- only one among a host -- one in a long space of time; like scattering beacon lights upon the mountain tops, that the aged may not quite despair of salvation. But God is intensely interested in saving the young, for he needs and loves to use them in his service. Oh how his heart goes forth after the young! How often has my soul been affected as I have thought of his parental interest for the salvation of this great multitude of youth! They come here from pious homes, freighted with the prayers of pious fathers and mothers, and what shall be the result? What has been the result, as thus far developed, with you? Has anything been really secured as yet? Is anything fixed and done for eternity? How many times have you been called to decide, but have decided wrong -- all wrong? You have been pressed earnestly with God's claims, and many a time have prayers and groans gone forth from the Christian heart of this whole community; but ah! where are you still? Not yet safe; ah, in greater peril than ever! Often reproved, hardening your neck; and what next? Suddenly destroyed, and that without remedy. Suppose even now the curtain should drop, you are dead! And whither, then, goes the undying, guilty soul?

3. How great the mistake made by Universalists, that all men will be saved, when the Bible holds that even the salvation of the righteous is difficult, and that of the sinner, impossible. How strangely they misread the whole Bible! Go not in their ways, O ye youth of Oberlin!

But what are you doing? Do you flatter yourselves that the work of salvation is all so easy that it may be safely and surely done during a few of life's last moments? Will you presume, as the man did who said he should need but five minutes to prepare to die? Hear his story. What was the result of his system? Disease came on. It smote him with its strong hand. Delirium set in. Reason tottered and fell from her throne, and so he died! Go on, thou young man; drive on, headlong and reckless; make a bold business of sinning, and bear it on with bold front and high hand; but know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Consider what tidings we hear of our former pupils who once sat as you now sit, and once heard the gospel as you may hear it now. There, one is dead; and now another -- and now another. In rapid succession they drop from the stage of mortal life and what next? What more? Soon we shall meet them in the fearful judgment!

Brethren, what will the universe say of us, if we neglect to labour for the salvation of these precious youth? What will the parents of these dear youth say to us when we shall meet them at the Saviour's bar?

I have spoken to you of the difficulties and the struggles of the Christian -- more and greater far than the ungodly are usually aware of; those agonies of prayer, those conflicts against temptation; out of all which it

is only great grace that can bring him forth, conqueror and more than conqueror. If he is saved with so much difficulty, how does it become you to strive to enter in at the strait gate? Are you aware that the smooth sea of temptation bears you on to the breakers of death? Were you ever at Niagara? How smooth and deceitful those waters, as they move along quite up above the draft of the suction from below! But lower down, see how those same waters roar, and dash, and foam, and send up their thick mists to the heavens above you. Yet in the upper stream you glide gently and noiselessly along, dreaming of no danger, and making no effort to escape. In a moment you are in the awful current, dashing headlong down; and where are you now?

And what should you do? Like Bunyan's Christian pilgrim, put your fingers in both ears, and run, shouting, Life! life! eternal LIFE! How many of you are sliding along on the smooth, deceitful stream, above, yet only just above, the awful rapids and the dreadful cataract of death! What if, this night, delirium should seize upon you? Or what if the Spirit should leave you for ever, and it should be said of you, "He is joined to his idols, let him alone?"

What do you say? Do I hear you saying, "If salvation is possible for me -- if by putting forth the whole energy of my will I can ensure it, Oh let me do so! Help me, O ye ministers of Christ's gospel! Help me, ye Christians, who pray between the porch and the altar! Help me, O ye heavens, of heavens for this is a thing of life and death, and the redemption of the soul is most precious!"

Surely, O ye sinners, it is time that you should set down your foot in most fixed determination, and say, "I must and I will have heaven! How can I ever bear the doom of the damned!"

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