

The Sinner's Excuses Answered

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney addresses the excuses of sinners, emphasizing God's justice and the necessity of personal responsibility in repentance and faith.

Scripture: Job 36:1

Topics: "Repentance", "God's Justice and Mercy"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the excuses of sinners who refuse to repent, emphasizing that their objections to God's justice and mercy are unfounded. He argues that the Bible does not portray God as unjust or cruel, but rather as a benevolent figure who desires the best for humanity. Finney illustrates how individuals often resist God's call to repentance, despite the overwhelming evidence of His love and the moral responsibility they hold. He encourages sinners to recognize their ability to change their hearts and to choose to please God rather than themselves. Ultimately, he calls for a sincere commitment to God, highlighting that even the simplest act of faith can be pleasing to Him.

Transcript

"Elihu also proceeded and said, Suffer me a little, and I will shew thee that I have yet to speak on God's behalf. I will fetch my knowledge from afar, and will ascribe righteousness to my Maker." -- Job xxxvi. 1-3.

ELIHU was present and heard the controversy between Job and his friends. The latter maintained that God's dealings with Job proved him wicked. This Job denied, and maintained that we could not judge men to be good or bad, from God's providential dealings with them, because facts show that the present is not a state of rewards and punishments. They, however, regarded this as taking part with the wicked, and hence did not shrink from accusing Job of doing this.

Elihu had previously said -- My desire is that Job may be tried in regard to what he has said of wicked men. But ere the discussion closed, he saw that Job had confounded his three friends, maintaining unanswerably that it was not because of any hypocrisy or special guilt that he was so signally scourged. Yet plainly even Job had not the key to explain the reason of God's dealings with him. To him it was still a mystery. He did not see that God might have been seeking to test and discipline his piety, or even to make an example of his integrity and submissiveness to confound the devil with.

Elihu purposed to speak in God's behalf and ascribed righteousness to his Maker. It is my present object to do the same in regard to sinners who refuse to repent, and who complain of God's ways. But before I

proceed, let me advert to a fact. Some years since, in my labours as an evangelist, I became acquainted with a man prominent in the place of his residence for his general intelligence, and whose two successive wives were daughters of Old School Presbyterian clergymen. Through them he had received many books to read on religious subjects, which they and their friends supposed would do him good, but which failed to do him any good at all. He denied the inspiration of the Bible, and on grounds which those books did not in his view obviate at all. Indeed, they only served to aggravate his objections.

When I came into the place, his wife was very anxious that I should see and converse with him. I called; she sent for him to come in and see the new minister; to which he replied that he was sure he could do him no good, since he had conversed with so many and found no light on the points that so much stumbled him; but upon her urgent entreaty, he consented for her sake to come in. I said to him in the outset, "Don't understand me as having called here to have a quarrel with you, and provoke a dispute. I only wish at your wife's request to converse with you, if you are perfectly willing, upon the great subject of divine revelation." He signified his pleasure to have such a conversation, and accordingly I asked him to state briefly his position. He replied "I admit the truths of natural religion, and believe most fully in the immortality of the soul, but not in the inspiration of the Scriptures. I am a Deist." But, said I, on what ground do you deny the inspiration of the Bible? Said he, I know it cannot be true. How do you know that? It contradicts the affirmations of my reason. You admit and I hold that God created my nature, both physical and moral. Here is a book, said to be from God, but it contradicts my nature. I therefore know it cannot be from God.

This of course opened the door for me to draw from him the particular points of his objection to the Bible as teaching what his nature contradicted. These points and my reply to them will constitute the body of my present discourse.

1. The Bible cannot be true because it represents God as unjust. I find myself possessed of convictions as to what is just and unjust. These convictions the Bible outrages. It represents God as creating men and then condemning them for another's sin.

Indeed, said I, and where? Say, where does the Bible affirm this?

Why, does it not? said he. No. Are you a Presbyterian? said he. Yes. He then began to quote the catechism. Stop, stop, said I, that is not the Bible. That is only a human catechism. True, said he, but does not the Bible connect the universal sin of the race with the sin of Adam? Yes, said I, it does in a particular way, but it is quite essential to our purpose to understand in what way. The Bible makes this connection incidental and not direct; and it always represents the sinner condemned as really sinning himself, and as condemned for his own sin.

But, continued he, children do suffer for their father's sins. Yes said I, in a certain sense it is so, and must be so. Do you not see yourself, everywhere, that children must suffer for the sins of their parents? and be blessed also by the piety of their parents? You see this and you find no fault with it. You see that children must be implicated in the good or ill conduct of their parents; their relation as children makes this absolutely unavoidable. Is it not wise and good that the happiness or misery of children should depend on their parents, and thus become one of the strongest possible motives to them to train them up in virtue? Yet it is true that the son is never rewarded or punished punitively for his parents' sins. The evil that befalls him through his connection with his parents is always disciplinary -- never punitive.

Again, he said, the Bible certainly represents God as creating men sinners, and as condemning them for their sinful nature. No, replied I; for the Bible defines sin as voluntary transgression of law, and it is absurd to suppose that a nature can be a voluntary transgression. Besides, it is in the nature of the case impossible that God should make a sinful nature. It is in fact doubly impossible, for the thing is a natural impossibility, and if it were not, it would yet be morally impossible that He should do it. He could not do it for the same reason that He can not sin.

In harmony with this is the fact that the Bible never represents God as condemning men for their nature, either here or at the judgment. Nowhere in the Bible is there the least intimation that God holds men responsible for their created nature, but only for the vile and pertinacious abuse of their nature. Other views of this matter, differing from this, are not the Bible, but are only false glosses put upon it usually by those whose philosophy has led them into absurd interpretations. Everywhere in the Bible men are condemned only for their voluntary sins, and are required to repent of these sins, and of these only. Indeed, there can possibly be no other sins than these.

Again, it is said, the Bible represents God as being cruel, inasmuch as He commanded the Jews to wage a war of extermination against the ancient Canaanites.

But why should this be called cruel? The Bible expressly informs us that God commanded this because of their awful wickedness. They were too awfully wicked to live. God could not suffer them to defile the earth and corrupt society. Hence He arose in His zeal for human welfare, and commanded to wash the land clean of such unutterable abominations. The good of the race demanded it. Was this cruel? Nay, verily, this was simply benevolent. It was one of the highest acts of benevolence to smite down such a race and sweep them from the face of the earth. And to employ the Jews as His executioners, giving them to understand distinctly why He commanded them to do it, was putting them in a way to derive the highest moral benefit from the transaction. In no other way could they have been so solemnly impressed with the holy justice of Jehovah. And now will any man find fault with God for this? None can do so, reasonably.

But the Bible allows slavery.

What? The Bible allow slavery? In what sense allow it? and under what circumstances? and what kind of slavery? These are all very important inquiries if we wish to know the certainty and the meaning of the things we say.

The Bible did indeed allow the Jews, in the case of captives taken in war, to commute death for servitude. When the customs of existing nations put captives taken in war to death, God authorized the Jews in certain cases to spare their captives and employ them as servants. By this means they were taken out from among idolatrous nations and brought into contact with the worship and ordinances of the true God.

Moreover, God enacted statutes for the protection of the Hebrew servant, which made his case infinitely better than being cut off in his sins. And who shall call this cruel? Jewish servitude was not American slavery, nor scarcely an approximation toward it. It would require too much time to go into the detail of this subject here. All that I have stated might be abundantly substantiated.

Again, it is objected God is unmerciful, vindictive, and implacable. The gentleman to whom I have alluded said -- I don't believe the Bible is from God when it represents Him as so vindictive and implacable that He would not forgive sin until He had first taken measures to kill His own Son.

Now it was by no means unnatural that, under such instructions he had received, he should think so. I had felt so myself. This very objection had stumbled me. But I afterwards saw the answer so plainly that it left nothing more to be desired. The answer indeed is exceedingly plain. It was not an implacable disposition in God which led Him to require the death of Christ as the ground of forgiveness. It was simply his benevolent regard for the safety and blessedness of His kingdom. He knew very well that it was unsafe to forgive sin without such a satisfaction. Indeed, this was the strongest possible exhibition of a forgiving disposition, to consent to the sacrifice of His Son for this purpose. He loved His Son, and certainly would not inflict one needless pang upon Him. He also loved a sinning race, and saw the depth of that ruin toward which they were rushing. Therefore He longed to forgive them, and to prepare a way in which He could do so with safety. He only desired to avoid all misapprehension. To forgive without such atonement as would adequately express His abhorrence of sin, would leave the intelligent universe to think that He did not care how much any beings should sin. This would not do.

Let it be considered also that the giving up of Jesus Christ was only a voluntary offering on God's part to sustain law, so that He could forgive without peril to His government. Jesus was not in any sense punished; He only volunteered to suffer for sinners that they might be freed from the governmental necessity of suffering. And was not mercy manifested in this? Certainly. How could it be manifested more signally?

But, says the objector, God is unjust, inasmuch as He requires impossibilities on pain of endless death.

Does He, indeed? Then where? In the law, is it, or in the Gospel? In these taken together we have the aggregate of all God's requirements. In what part, then, of either law or Gospel do you find the precept contained which requires impossibilities? Is it in the law? But the law says only "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart;" not with another man's heart, but simply with thine own; only with all thine own heart, not with more than all. Read on still further: "and with all thy strength." Not with the strength of an angel -- not with the strength of any other being than thyself, and only with such an amount of strength as you actually have for the time being. The demands of the law, you see, exactly meet your ability; nothing more and nothing else.

Indeed, said he, this is a new view of the subject. Well, but is not this just as it should be? Does not the law carry with it, its own vindication in its very terms? How can any one say that the law requires of us impossible service -- things we have no power to do? The fact is, it requires us to do just what we can and nothing more. Where, then, is this objection to the Bible? Where is the impossibility of which you speak?

But, resumed he, is it not true that "no mere man since the fall has been able wholly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed?"

Ah, my friend, that's catechism, not Bible; we must be careful not to impute to the Bible all that human catechisms have said. The Bible only requires you to consecrate to God what strength and powers you actually have, and is by no means responsible for the affirmation that God requires of man more than he can do. No, verily, the Bible nowhere imputes to God a requisition so unreasonable and cruel. No wonder the human mind should rebel against such a view of God's law. If any human law were to require impossibilities, there could be no end to the denunciations that must fall upon it. No human mind could possibly approve of such a law. Nor can it be supposed that God can reasonably act on principles which would disgrace and ruin any human government.

But, resumed he, here is another objection. The Bible represents men as unable to believe the Gospel unless they are drawn by God, for it reads, "No man can come to me except the Father who hath sent me draw him." Yet sinners are required to believe on pain of damnation. How is this?

To this the reply is, first, the connection shows that Christ referred to drawing by means of teaching or instruction; for to confirm what He had said, He appeals to the ancient scriptures, "It is written, They shall all be taught of God." Without this teaching, then, none can come. They must know Christ before they can come to Him in faith. They cannot believe till they know what to believe. In this sense of coming, untaught heathen are not required to come. God never requires any to come, who have not been taught. Once taught, they are bound to come, may be and are required to come, and are without excuse if they refuse.

But, replied he, the Bible does really teach that men cannot serve the Lord, and still it holds them responsible for doing it. Joshua said to all the people, "Ye cannot serve the Lord, for He is an holy God."

Let us see. Joshua had called all the people together and had laid before them their obligation to serve the Lord their God. When they all said so readily and with so little serious consideration that they would, Joshua replied, "Ye cannot serve the Lord for He is a holy God; He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins." What did he mean? Plainly this -- Ye cannot serve God, because you have not heartily abandoned your sins. You cannot get along with a God so holy and so jealous, unless you give up sinning. You cannot serve God with a selfish heart. You cannot please Him till you really renounce your sins altogether. You must begin by making to yourselves a new heart. Joshua doubtless saw that they had not given up their sins and had not really begun to serve God at all, and did not even understand the first principles of true religion. This is the reason why he seemed to repulse them so suddenly. It is as if he would say -- Stop; you must go back and begin with utterly putting away all your sins. You cannot serve a holy and jealous God in any other way, for He will not go along with you as His people if you persist in sinning against Him.

It is a gross perversion of the Bible to make it mean that men have no power to do what God requires. It is true indeed, that in this connection it sometimes uses the words can and can not, but these and similar words should be construed according to the nature of the subject. All reasonable men construe thus intuitively in all common use of language. The Bible always employs the language of common life and in the way of common usage. Hence it should be thus interpreted.

When it is said that Joseph's brethren hated him and could not speak peaceably to him, the meaning is not that their organs of speech could not articulate kind words; but it points us to a difficulty in the heart. They hated him so badly they could not speak pleasantly. Nor does the sacred historian assume that they could not at once subdue this hatred and treat Joseph as brother should treat brother. The sacred writers are the last men in the world to apologize for sin on this wise.

There is the case of the angels sent to hasten Lot out of guilty Sodom. One said, "Haste thee escape thither, for I can not do anything until thou be come thither." Does this mean that the Almighty God had no power to overwhelm Sodom so long as Lot was in it? Certainly not. It meant only that it was His purpose not to destroy the city till Lot was out. Indeed, all men use language thus in common life. You go into one of our village stores and say to the merchant, Can you lift a ton of your goods at once? No. Can you sell me that piece of cloth for a shilling a yard? No. Does this it can mean the same as the other? By no means. But how is it that you detect the difference? How is it that you come to know so readily which is the physical cannot and which the moral? The nature of the subject tells you.

But, you say, the same word ought always to mean the same thing. Well, if it ought to, it does not, in any language ever yet spoken by man. And yet there is no difficulty in understanding even the most imperfect of human languages if men are honest in speaking and honest in hearing, and will use their common sense. They intuitively construe language according to the nature of the subject spoken of.

The Bible always assumes that sinners can not do right and please God with a wicked heart. It always takes the ground that God abhors hypocrisy -- that He can not be satisfied with mere forms and professions of service when the heart is not in it, and hence that all acceptable service must begin with making a new and sincere heart.

But here is another difficulty. Can I make to myself a new heart?

Yes, and you could not doubt but that you could, if you only understood what the language means, and what the thing is.

See Adam and Eve in the garden. What was their heart? Did God create it? No; it is not possible that He should, for a heart in this sense is not the subject of physical creation. When God made Adam, giving him all the capacities for acting morally, he had no heart good or bad until he came to act morally. When did he first have a moral heart? When he first waked to moral consciousness and gave his heart to God. When first he saw God manifested, and put confidence in Him as his Father, and yielded up his heart to Him in love and obedience. Observe, he first had this holy heart because he yielded up his will to God in entire consecration. This was his first holy heart.

But at length the hour of temptation came, alluring him to withdraw his heart from God and turn to pleasing himself. To Eve the tempter said "Hath God indeed said -- Ye shall not surely die?" Ah, is that so? Then he raised the question either as to the fact that God had really threatened death for sin, or as to the justice of doing so. In either case it raised a question about obedience and opened the heart to temptation. Then that fruit came before her mind. It was fair and seemed good for food. Her appetite enkindles and clamours for indulgence. Then, it was said to be fitted to "make one wise," and by eating it she might "be as the gods, knowing good and evil." This appealed to her curiosity. Yielding to this temptation and making up her mind to please herself, she made herself a new heart of sin; she changed her heart from holiness to sin, and fell from her first moral position. When Adam yielded to temptation, he made the same change in his heart; he gave himself up to selfishness and sin. This accounts for all future acts of selfishness in after life.

Adam and Eve are again brought before God. God says to Adam -- Give me thy heart. Change your heart. What! says Adam, I cannot change my own heart! But God replies, How long is it since you have done it? It is but yesterday that you changed your own heart from holiness to sin; why can't you change it back?

So in all cases. Changing the ruling preference, the governing purpose of the mind, is the thing, and who can say, I cannot do that. Cannot you do that? Cannot you give yourself to God?

The reason you cannot please God in your executive acts, is that your governing purpose is not right. While your leading motive is wrong, all you do is selfish, because it is all done for the single object of pleasing yourself. You do nothing for the sake of pleasing God, and with the governing design and purpose of doing all His holy will; hence all you do, even your religious duties, only displease God. If the Bible had anywhere represented God as being pleased with your hypocritical services it would be proven false, for this is perfectly impossible.

But you say, the Bible requires me to begin with the inner man -- the heart -- and you say you cannot get at this; that you cannot reach your own heart or will to change it.

Indeed, you are entirely mistaken. This is the very thing that is most entirely within your power. Of all things conceivable, this is the very thing that you can do most certainly -- that is most absolutely within your power. If God had made your salvation turn upon your walking across the room, you might not be able to do it; or if upon lifting your eyelids or rising from your seat, or any the least movement of your muscles, you might be utterly unable to do it. You could will the motion required, and you could try; but the muscles might have no power to act. You often think that if God had only conditioned your salvation upon some motions of your muscles, it would have been so easy; if He had only asked you to control the outside; but, oh, you say, how can I control the inside? The inside is the very thing you can move and control. If it had been the outside, you might strive and groan till you die, and not be able to move a muscle, even on pain of an eternal hell. But now inasmuch as God only says, "Change your will," all is brought within your control. This is just the thing you always can do; you can always move your will. You can always give your heart, at your own option. Where, then, is your difficulty and objection? God requires you to act with your freedom; to exercise the powers of free voluntary action that He has given you. He asks you to put your hand on the fountainhead of all your own power, to act just where your central power lies -- where YOU ALWAYS HAVE POWER so long as you have a rational mind and a moral nature. Your liberty does not consist in a power to move your muscles at pleasure, for the connection between your muscles and your will may be broken, and at all events is always necessary when your body is in its normal state; therefore God does not require you to perform any particular movement of the muscles, but only to change your will. This, compared with all other things, is that which you can always do, and can do more surely than anything else.

Again, considering volitions as distinct from ultimate purposes, and as standing next before executive acts, it is not volitions that God requires, but He lays His requisition directly upon the ultimate purposes. The ultimate purposes being given, these subordinate volitions follow naturally and necessarily. Your liberty, therefore, does not, strictly speaking, lie in these subordinate volitions -- such as the volition to sit, to walk, to speak. But the ultimate purpose controlling all volition, and relating to the main object you shall pursue, as, for example, whether you shall in all things strive to please God, or, on the other hand, strive to please yourself; this being the precise point wherein your liberty of free action lies, is the very point upon which God lays His moral requisitions. The whole question is, will you please God, or please yourself? Will you give your heart to Him, or give it to your own selfish enjoyment?

So long as you give your heart to selfish pleasure and withhold it from God, it will be perfectly natural for you to sin. This is precisely the reason why it is so natural for sinners to sin. It is because the will, the heart, is set upon it, and all they have to do is to carry out this ruling propensity and purpose. But, just change this governing purpose, and you will find obedience equally natural and equally easy in all its executive acts. It will then become natural to please God in everything. Now pleasing yourself is natural enough. Why? Because you are consecrated to pleasing yourself. But change this purpose; make a new and totally opposite consecration; reverse the committed heart, and let it be for God and not for self; then all duty will be easy for the same reason that all sin is so easy now.

So far is it from being true that you are unable to make your heart new, the fact is you would long ago have done it if you had not resisted God in His efforts to move you to repentance. Do you not know that you have often resisted God's Spirit? You know it well. So clear were your convictions that you ought to live for God, you had to resist every appeal of your own conscience, and march right in the face of known

duty, and press your way along directly against God. If you had only listened to the voice of your reason, and to the demands of your conscience, you would have had a new heart long ago. But you resisted God when He tried to persuade you to have a new heart. O, sinner, how strong you have been to resist God! How strong to resist every consideration addressed to your intelligence and to your reason! How strangely have you listened to the considerations for sinning! O, the miserable petty things -- tell me, what were they? Suppose Christ should question you, and ask -- What is there in earth that you should love it so well? What in sin that you should prize it above my favour and my love? What are those little indulgences -- those very small things that always perish with the using? Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Most utterly contemptible! You have been holding on to sin with no reasonable motive for so doing. But O, consider what motives you have fought against and resisted -- motives of almost infinite force! Think of the motives resulting from God's law -- so excellent in itself, but so dreadful in its penalties against transgressors; and then think also of God's infinite love in the Gospel; how He opened the life-tides of His great heart, and let blessings flow with fullness like a God! Yet consider how, despite of this love, you have abused your God exceedingly. You have gone on as if the motives to sin were all-persuasive, and as if sin's promises of good were more reliable than God's. When God spread out before you the glories of heaven, made all attractive and delightful in the beauties of holiness, you coolly replied -- Earth is far better! Give me earth while I can have it, and heaven only when I can have earth no longer! O, sinner, you would have been converted a long time ago if you had not opposed God and trodden under foot His invitations and His appeals.

O, what a thing is this moral agency! How awful its power, and how momentous, therefore, must be its responsibilities. When God is pouring forth influences in waves of light and power, with a kind of moral omnipotence, you resist and withstand all! As if you could do anything you pleased despite of God! As if His influence were almost utterly powerless to move your heart from its fixed purpose to sin!

Does it require great strength to lay down your weapons? Indeed, this is quite a new thing; for one would suppose it must rather require great strength to resist and to fight. And so you put forth your great strength in fighting against God, and would fain believe that you have not got strength enough to lay your weapons down! O, the absurdity of sin and of the sinner's apology for sinning!

But you say -- I must have the Holy Ghost. I answer, Yes; but only to overcome your voluntary opposition. That is all.

After I had gone over this ground with my friend, as I have already explained, he became very much agitated. The sweat started from every pore; his feelings overcame him; he dropped his head down upon his knees, buried in intensest thought and full of emotion. I rose and went to the meeting. After it had progressed awhile he came in; but O, how changed! Said he, "Dear wife, I don't know what has become of my infidelity. I ought to be sent to hell! What charges I have been making against God! And yet with what amazing mercy did my God bear with me and let me live!" In fact, he found he had been all wrong and he broke all down and became as a little child before God.

And you, too, sinner, know you ought to live for God, yet you have not; you know that Jesus made Himself an offering to the injured dignity of that law which you violated, yet you have rejected Him. He gave Himself a voluntary offering, not to suffer the penalty of the law, but as your legal substitute; and shall He have done all this in vain? Do you say, "O, I'm so prejudiced against God and the Bible!" What, so prejudiced that you will not repent? How horrible! O let it suffice that you have played the fool so long and erred so exceedingly. It has been all wrong! At once return and devote yourself to God. Why should you

live to yourself at all? You can get no good so!

Come to God -- He is so easily pleased! It is so much easier to please Him than to please and satisfy yourself. The veriest little child can please Him. Children often have the most delightful piety, because it is so simple-hearted. They know what to do to please God, and, meaning honestly to please Him, they can not fail. No matter how simple-hearted they are, if they mean to please God, they surely will.

And can not you at least do so much as honestly to choose and aim to please God?

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/the-sinners-excuses-answered/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net