

The Spirit Ceasing to Strive

by Charles Finney

The Spirit's striving with man is a moral influence that persuades, reasons, and convinces, and will cease when it will not do them any good and their guilt is aggravated.

Scripture: Genesis 6:3, John 16:8, Ephesians 4:30, Hebrews 3:7

Topics: "Spiritual Sensitivity", "The Work of the Holy Spirit"

Description

Charles Finney discusses the profound implications of God's Spirit striving with humanity, emphasizing that this striving is a moral influence that persuades and convicts individuals of their sinfulness. He explains that the Spirit's striving is often met with resistance, leading to a state of apathy and opposition when the Spirit ceases to strive. Finney warns that the consequences of ignoring the Spirit's call can result in a hardened heart and a loss of spiritual sensitivity, ultimately jeopardizing one's eternal destiny. He urges listeners to recognize the seriousness of the Spirit's work in their lives and to respond before it is too late, as the moment of striving is critical for salvation. The preacher calls for honesty and sincerity in one's relationship with God, stressing the importance of not quenching the Spirit's influence.

Transcript

"And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man." --Genesis vi. 3.

The following is the train of thought which I design to pursue:--

- I. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN THE ASSERTION OF THE TEXT?
- II. WHAT IS INTENDED BY THE SPIRIT'S "STRIVING" WITH MAN?
- III. HOW MAY WE KNOW WHEN HE IS STRIVING WITH US?
- IV. WHAT IS MEANT BY "SHALL NOT ALWAYS STRIVE?"
- V. WHY WILL HE "NOT ALWAYS STRIVE?"
- VI. THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS CEASING TO STRIVE.

These two things are implied in the assertion of our text; first, that God's Spirit strives with man at least sometimes, and consequently that men do resist him always when there is strife; whenever the Spirit is obliged to strive with a man in order to influence him, why then, of course, resistance is implied. It should

always be understood that whenever the Spirit can really be said to "strive" with an individual, that individual must be resisting. But what is intended by his striving? This striving, then, I would observe, is not a physical striving, but a moral influence, persuading, reasoning and convincing. This is the striving; it is a striving of mind with mind, and not of body with body. The process spoken of in the text is the presentation of truth on one side, and the resistance of it on the other. But if this is so, how do we know when the Spirit strives with us?

First, then, let me say, we cannot know this by a direct perception of his agency. The mind does not see the Holy Spirit himself, but it perceives the truth which the Spirit presents; for, observe the "striving" referred to is the pressing of considerations upon the mind to influence it, and the "resistance" spoken of is the resistance to the reception of these truths. In inquiring into the evidences of the Spirit's striving with man, we must see what are these particular truths which are thus presented to the mind, and which call forth this "resistance?" We are informed in the Bible what it is that the Spirit of God does--he reproveth of sin, for example. Christ promised he should do this, and that he should "take of the things of Christ and show them" to mankind. One of the signs by which men are made conscious that the Spirit is working within them is, the arresting of their attention to the subject of religious truth--they find these things fermenting in their minds and pressing upon them. Perhaps when they read or attend to business, do what they will the subject is always coming up. If they reasoned on the subject, they could come to no other conclusion than that there was some invisible agency at work within them which kept the matter incessantly before them; it seems to occupy their minds more than ever it did before. They feel an internal conviction of its light, its power, and its reality in a manner of which they had hitherto no conception. This is the striving of the Spirit.

Again, conviction of the sinfulness of one's conduct is another sign of the operations of the Spirit within. When men feel the sinfulness of their course of life, that is the striving of the Spirit. Men often go on in sin without reflecting on the sinfulness of what they are doing; but, by and by, the wickedness of their ways seems to have gained their attention. Looking back on their general conduct, and especially on particular acts, they see their sinfulness; things now come frequently up in their minds and trouble them which had passed unthought of, it may be for years, and when remembered, were not regarded by them as sins. But now they appear to regard them from a different point, and see their error. In some cases there will be a general sense of their sinfulness, of their whole lives--in others, particular acts will stand out and display themselves in a new and sinful light. This is an evident sign of the striving of the Spirit. When persons are striven with by the Spirit, they are not always greatly alarmed at the realization of their dangerous position, though this is sometimes the case. Sometimes the Spirit does not strive with men because they think so little of their danger, so that they eventually come to fear the results of the Spirit's not striving more with them. The Spirit often gives such persons a distinct and awful glimpse of the exposure of their position.

Again; there are certain forms of sin to which some men are apt to be exceedingly blind; and when these persons are striven with by the Spirit, they come suddenly to a clear perception of this blindness under which they have been labouring. Without this striving these men are very apt to become self-righteous; and when they do feel intensely they are apt to resist and hold out against the Spirit, while all the time they give themselves credit for the possession of these tender feelings. Now it often happens that the Spirit drives off all this by allowing them to become so alarmingly hardened as to find that even these tender feelings on which they were wont to pride themselves have disappeared. Up to the very hour of their surrendering to God this hardness sometimes increases, till they begin to perceive that they never had so little feeling on the subject of religion; their hearts are as hard as adamant. The Spirit often shows these

men that they have been mistaking the mere excitement of their feelings for tenderness of heart. Sometimes he convicts them of their unbelief, and shows them that they did not in reality place reliance on God--that they actually placed more reliance on what man said than on what God said. Men are influenced by each other's testimony, and if a man promises to another that he will do thus and thus, his friends believe and trust him and act accordingly. Now ask this man, Do you believe the Bible? Oh! yes, he believes the Bible. But is he influenced by what it promises, as much as he is by what men promise? No, indeed. Let a man come and warn you of your danger, would you not believe and act? If a man should promise you aid, would you not be relieved and comforted by it? If a man gave you a promissory note, as the donor was a man of property, would you not naturally expect to have it paid? But you do not believe God in these respects, yet you are apt to think that you do believe God; but the Spirit at length shows you that you are more comforted by men's promises than by God's--that God's promises in reality afford you very little satisfaction--in fact, that you are actually not at all influenced by what God says, as you are by what men say; when, therefore, you thus come to see the sin of this unbelief, you may rest assured that the Holy Spirit is striving with you.

Again: he convinces men of their enmity against God. Few men think themselves enemies of God and of religion, even if they do profess themselves to be Christians. It is very common where persons have made a profession of religion, got into the church, and yet are not true Christians; I have observed that if they are not given up of God and become reprobates, if God intends to save them, God convinces them that, in reality, they are enemies of religion. Now you can all see the necessity of this. They profess to love religion, and how can they be saved unless they are convinced that they have made a radical mistake? The Spirit often commences by suffering this enmity to develop itself. They begin by complaining, perhaps, of the preaching; it is too severe, too personal, not "comforting" enough, or something of that kind; either the matter does not suit, or the manner is disagreeable; they want something that will make them happy--something "comforting." They say they are Christians, and believe they speak the truth; they feel sure that if the preaching were what it ought to be, it would be sure to edify and "comfort" them. But God does not mean they should feel so, if he ever intends to save them. They are in a state of delusion, and anything that would make them happy, in this state, would only confirm their delusion; and consequently, God always so directs the preaching and everything as to make it set on them in such a manner as to show them clearly what has, by a great mistake, hitherto been covered up--the enmity of their hearts towards God.

Sometimes I have been struck by the extent to which this has been the case in revivals of religion. Some member of the church, to the astonishment of their ministers, begin to oppose the movement, finding fault with this thing and with that thing; they stay away from their services, go here and go there where they can be "comforted." But the Spirit of God continues to strive with them, and keeps them uneasy, being determined to root out the enmity of their hearts. They come to meeting again and again, and go mumbling away with something more unpalatable than ever; they become each time less "comfortable." Ah! they think "this is not the gospel, for it does not 'comfort' them." How strange everything appears to them! Ah! this is the very way in which the Spirit works; he is determined to drag them out of their hiding places and unmask them. It is curious how long this oftentimes goes on till every one but themselves can see it. The very preaching that is moving the masses to inquire and leading numbers to God, all[ah]! they "are not edified with it at all."

But do you not see there is a divine philosophy in all this? Oh! yes. These persons are sometimes very numerous in a church; pastors are often astonished to see so many of their members cavil and object.

They object all the more, by how much the more powerful it comes home to them. By and by the pastor and deacons look on in amazement to see their members running hither and thither in such confusion. "What's the matter? What's the matter?" why the truth does not sit well on that unbroken heart! They writhe and writhe, finding this fault and that fault, till by and by, they see they do not really love the preaching that God loves--that they are, in fact, at enmity with God. Ah! I have seen them turn pale at such times; but by and by the fact comes out. "Oh! I thought I was a Christian! I have been so many years a member of the church, and yet I find that I stand before God condemned! I see that God and I are at issue--that God loves what I hate, and blesses what I oppose!" Ah! Now this is exactly the way the Spirit of God would take with such persons.

I have often heard, when preaching at various places, "Why, there's such and such a professor saying so and so." But by and by you will see evidently that the truth is coming home, and hitting him hard. Why, see! he's all in a "squerm" again. Pray for him! What's the matter with him? What has been said--any untruth? "Oh, no, but he seems to think you are so personal." Ah! does he. Pray for him! God has got hold of him. He thinks that the minister and all the people are looking right at him; that he is speaking to him personally, and that all the congregation knows it. "Why," said a man to me one day, "it seemed as if not only did you look at me, and mean me, but that everybody knew it and looked at me." Now this is just what God does; and if you see a man begin to "squerm," pray for him. Do not be frightened. "Ah!" says a woman, "why, how my husband is offended! He thinks you are personal." Oh, does he: well, pray for him! Do not you see that he is clearly striving against the reception of the truths? "Why?" "Because," says he, "it means me." Does it? Then do not you resist it? Oh! I like to get upon the track of such persons, and hunt them out. I like to follow them and hunt them up, and search them out, till they are broken down. This is the way the Holy Spirit does; he is very personal, and makes the truth personal. He directs the mind of the preacher in such a manner as to make it stick close to an individual he wishes to move; thus it is that people get the impression that the preacher knows them and their history, and think somebody must have been telling him about them. During my thirty years experience, persons have often told me this, whereas it was nothing else than the Almighty directing my thoughts in a certain channel, in order to meet their case. God knew them, although I did not. My bow was drawn at a venture, but God directed the arrow, and it found its way through the joints of their harness; and they were "not comforted." "Not comforted!" Why, the gospel was never made to comfort you in your unsanctified state.

This is also very often the case with merely moral men, who help by their means to support religious institutions; such men are very apt to overlook the fact that they are enemies to God; and therefore, God must in some way show it to them. How is he to do it? They are almost Christians in their own opinion. Their religious wives say--"Oh! I have great hope of him." How often has this been the case. But God sees their real state. They do not come out and acknowledge Christ publicly. God knows there is a rotten heart there. They are amiable, and their exterior is lovely; God must make them know themselves by a course of teaching, preaching, providences, or some other method, and thus take off the veil from their hearts. This being done, they begin to writhe and act in the way the professors just spoken of are accustomed to act. "They are not going there to be preached at in that way, when they are doing so much to aid religion. To be treated in such a manner they think is very personal and abusive." It is very hard, they cannot bear it, although they do not, and cannot deny its truth. By and by you will see them writhe. This shows that there is a sediment at the bottom of their hearts; stir it up. Do not be afraid. Pray for them. If you find your unchristian husband begin to squerm, and threaten not to go to meeting, do not side with him, and say you think he has reason to be offended. If you do not want to ruin his soul, do not take his part. "Oh! " say to him, "Is it true? then you ought to receive it. Is it true of you? you are bound to receive it; for if it means

you, and you do not receive it, what will become of you? What! you confess it is true, and true of you, and yet refuse to receive it!" Be careful what you do under such circumstances; for wherever persons thus quarrel with truth, they are, in reality, quarrelling with God. Mark that. But these people often pretend that it is not the truth they quarrel with, but the offensive manner in which it is said. Now mark. Take care what you do. A real lover of truth is willing to receive it, though it is not on a golden dish.

And the way in which God convinces the sinner of the danger of his dying in sin, is, by impressing him with the fact that he has not long to live. He feels that others around are dying in their sins, that he himself has lived a long time in his sin, and he begins to calculate on probabilities, and to apply it to himself. This often is used as a means of inducing decision, or at least, of greatly deepening previous impressions. And the mode in which the Spirit operates is to warn men of the danger of his leaving them. At other times he shows them that they are actually ashamed of Christ--ashamed to have it known that they think of being religious--ashamed to talk even to their wives, or open their mind to their minister-- ashamed to be seen reading the Bible, or to have it known that their minds are exercised on the subject. Persons in this state are afraid of being supposed to be serious, and therefore often laugh and try to conceal it, while at heart they are full of soreness and distress. But this shows them more and more that they are ashamed of Christ; and they begin to perceive their pride of heart and the awful wickedness of the position they occupy in relation to God.

Sometimes the Spirit operates by leaving men wholly without excuse. Every plea they have been accustomed to urge is swept from under them. They have none left to hide behind as they were wont to do. The Spirit follows them in their excuses, and strips them off one by one, till he has silenced them all; and they turn them over and over, one after the other, but cannot find one to rest upon. The Spirit of God thus strove with me for months before I was aware of it; but at length I found as I fled from one excuse to another; but my mind would answer each as it rose. Thus the Spirit undermines all my fortifications, till I had not a single apology to make for my conduct. Now mark. Perhaps this very process is going on with some of you. How is it? If you feel that I am personal, see if the truth sits well upon you. If you find that any particular truth does not sit well upon you, whatever your character may be in a general way, rely upon it that you are at war at least with that one truth; and if at war with truth, you are at war with God.

Persons are sometimes convinced by seeing that they have been altogether selfish. Selfishness is sin; and all sin is selfishness in some form. Persons often see that their very religion has hitherto been selfishness; they can see clearly that they are not in sympathy with God and with Christ--that they have not the spirit of Christ within them--that they are not living to and for God--and that they are utterly selfish, in their business, and even in the relations they sustain to what they call their religion. They are fully convinced of this. Ah! are you convinced of it? Do not resist the light on such questions! Oh! if you shut down the gate, turn your eyes away, and refuse to be convinced you will wake up in the blackness and darkness for ever!

Before I leave this subject I ought to say that sinners often get the impression on their minds, that this is the last call God will ever give them. Doubtless the Spirit of God means what he says. In such cases it would be very natural for the Spirit in taking the last struggle with a man, to give him such an impression: it is no doubt common for him to do so. Professors of religion have often seen at such times great reason to doubt whether they were even truly converted, and this impression has been confirmed by a glimpse at their lives. By and bye, perhaps, the Spirit of God impresses them with the idea that if they now resist, they will die in their sins. Now, sinner, when God insinuates such things he is in earnest. The devil does not want you to believe any such things; he would not tell you so if he knew it. It comes from one who cannot

lie, and who, in his benevolence, forewarns you that, if you now resist, you are a ruined soul to all eternity.

What is meant by the assertion that the Spirit will "not always strive?" Not, of course, that he will leave the earth; but that he will not always follow a man through the whole of his life, and continue to strive with him to the end of his days.

Why not? First, because it will not do them any good. If, after so many strivings, a man will not repent, why should the Spirit continue to follow him? They are enlightened as much as they need to be enlightened, yet they resist and resist--why then should he continue to strive with them? Again, he forbears to do so in compassion to them. When he has once thrust home these very truths which must convert them, if they ever are converted, he knows that, by a natural law of their minds, the longer they resist the more likely they are to continue resisting. Besides, it would materially enhance their guilt. There is, therefore, no way consistent with his honour in which he can follow them any longer. Again: their guilt is so aggravated under such circumstances--from their striving with God face to face, and resisting--sinning with full light and tempting God's forbearance--these considerations present another reason. They hope God will save them in their sins at some future time, but it would be inconsistent with God's honour to do so. There is a point beyond which it is inconsistent with God's high and adorable sovereignty, that men should continue to resist and quarrel with him face to face. Again, if this were not so, men would take courage and continue in their sins, with the idea that they would be just as likely to have the Spirit strive with them when old as when young; and therefore, to avoid this inference, God's Spirit will not always strive with man. Once more. God needs young persons to be converted, that he may train them up to do good: but if they go on till they have well nigh burnt out the lamp of life, God will, indeed, have compassion on them, if they repent; but how seldom do they repent, under such circumstances! They have wasted their life and can do no good if they are converted; and, having served the devil so long, shall they take the stinking snuff of their expiring lamp--the jaded, putrid remnant of mortality which has resisted the Holy Ghost till the grave is open before them--and cast it, as it were, in the face of the Almighty? But again: it would be bad policy on the part of God's government to convert old people as easily as young ones; it would tend to harden the young in their sins: the general rule, therefore, must be the conversion of the young, while the conversions of the old will be at distances just sufficient in number to keep the aged sinner from utterly despairing.

But we must now proceed to inquire what are the consequences of the Spirit ceasing?

The first consequence, naturally, is confirmed apathy--carelessness and prayerlessness in sin. This is the general rule. Another consequence is, confirmed opposition; after the Spirit of God has convinced persons--when they have resisted strong convictions--when their consciences have smarted under the force of truth--they hate it. Their very consciences become unfeeling. They can commit sins now without compunction, which once would have filled them with agony--they go on in sin with very little remorse. This, too, is a general rule, as I might show; but in some instances there is the reverse--a fearful looking for of judgment. They often, however, wax worse and worse, until if they do not go out into open apostacy, it is only the fear of their reputation prevents them. Christians will find themselves losing the spirit of prayer for them. The wife will lose the power to pray for her husband under such circumstances; she loses her hold on the throne of grace for him; and it is the same in the husband towards the wife, the parent towards the child, and the child towards the parent. The Spirit will not lead a man to pray for those who have grieved him away. No means that are used will savingly affect them; they will become more and more opposed to the means, till they finally abandon the use of them, and the evil habits they formerly indulged in, come back strongly upon them.

A few remarks must conclude what I have to say, and the first remark is this: Have you been thus striven with? Did the spirit of cavilling resistance come upon you? Have you felt, at some time, that the minister meant you? Perhaps you have said, "Now, if that minister had known my history, he could not have told it better." Have you been in this state? Have you felt offended at his being so "personal?" I have often thought that there are multitudes of professors of religion who have thoroughly quenched the Spirit; and the reason I think so is this: they are in the church, and hold themselves up in hope, while everybody who knows them, sees that the Spirit of Christ is not within them; if they are searched they feel displeased; there is a want of honesty in their hearts--a want of that downright sincerity in religion--there is a slipperiness, carnal policy, quibbling dishonesty, a putting on of religion--still there is something which serves to bolster them up. They are particular to keep themselves in countenance by regular attendance at the administration of the ordinance, lest the minister or deacons should get at the fact of their being in a state of apostasy from God. But try to get them to do anything else, and you cannot secure their co-operation, unless it is where their character is concerned. Ah! they say, here is such a one's name on the book, has he had a communion ticket? How is this? Ah! they have attended to that, and thus they have covered up the rottenness of their heart and their carnal worldly life by going to the communion!

Oh! I do not know if there are any such persons here to-night, but as my mind is strongly pressed in this direction, I fear there are; and if God is now showing you that you ought to be honest with yourselves, do not go on with your deceitful game! I do not know you--but God knows you; I only beg of you not to ruin your soul by cheating yourself on a point so vital. Many professors get into that state that they hear unmoved the truths which smite the hearts of infidels and break them in pieces as a potter's vessel. They sit unmoved, or if moved at all, it is only to opposition. They have no sympathy with the work of God--no care about anybody being converted, even perhaps their own children. I have known churches where some of the members were the most hardened reprobate persons I ever knew in all my life--the most disposed to cavil, and the least disposed to co-operate. You deacons know whether such persons are here to-night; when you meet the man you are now thinking about, do you find him disposed to cavil, or is his heart in the work? You know whose hearts are in the work, and who, you have reason to believe, are hardened in their sins. The fact is on such subjects as this, it is the most awful cruelty not to deal faithfully with such men. I would sooner cut off both my hands than play a silly game with a man about his soul, his sins, and eternity! I have often been astonished to find that while professors cavil, ungodly men have said, "Ah! that's just what we need, let it come! Let us know the truth, and the worst of our case. Let it come burning and boiling till it melts the ice-bergs of our hearts!["]

One word more. When the Spirit strives men are in great danger of putting off submission day after day till at length the Spirit leaves them. They try to think about religion, but do not come to the point. Ah! They do not know the infinite danger they are in of being left amidst all this palavering. Ah! "While thy servant was busy here and there, behold the Spirit was gone." They must wait till they have done this thing or that thing, and thus they go on; day after day the Spirit strives with them till at length he takes his flight. You should reflect that every moment you are resisting, you are in infinite danger of his leaving you. "My Spirit shall not always strive."

Again: when the Spirit strives it is the most solemn point of the sinner's existence. The judgment-day will disclose things which are done in time, but the sinner's destiny is settled here. When the Spirit strives with men he settles with them personally. The work is done up one way or the other, and becomes a matter of record. The leaf is folded and laid aside till the day of judgment; but here is the time and place in which the thing is done--this is the world on which hangs suspended the eternal life or death of immortal souls. But

not only is the matter finally settled in this world, but there must be some turning point at which the settlement takes place. What an hour is that! Christian! Do you realise that when the Spirit is striving with your children, they are then at a moment more important to them than any other moment of their whole existence. Are you asleep over it? Do you see them honest on religious subjects, or do they creep to the house of God hardly willing to let you know it? Do you see already indications that the Spirit of God has been with them? Are you not looking after this? If you see this interest in their countenances--oh! what are you doing? Are you watching unto prayer? Do you feel how great their danger is? Do you feel that their crisis is infinitely more solemn than a fever would be, provided they were Christians? The eternal destinies may hang on that moment, and what are you doing? God is solemn and in earnest, angels are solemn and in earnest, devils are solemn and in earnest, the Holy Spirit is solemn and in earnest--and do you trifle? Who are you that you should trifle? Why the very one that heaven and hell are earnest about! Oh! sinner what are you doing? Professor of religion what are you doing? Who can come with his hand upon his breast and say, "Oh, Lord Jesus thou knowest that I love thee, that in my life I acknowledge thee, and that I do this in remembrance of thee, and will show forth thy death till thou comest?" Are you prepared to come and partake of these elements, and prepared to come in such a sense that those who know you feel that you are such a person that you have a right to come? Or do they say of you, What Mr. _____! why I should never have thought that he was a member! What! does he come to the Communion? Is that woman a professor? Why, I have seen them in such places, and under such circumstances that I should never have thought it!

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