

The Spirit Not Striving Always

by Charles Finney

The Spirit of God strives with men to convince them of their sin and lead them to repentance, but will not always strive with those who resist Him.

Scripture: Genesis 6:3, John 16:7

Topics: "The Striving of the Holy Spirit", "The Danger of Resistance"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the critical nature of the Holy Spirit's striving with humanity, explaining that while the Spirit does strive with individuals, there comes a point when this striving ceases due to persistent resistance. He outlines the implications of this cessation, including the dangers of hardening one's heart and the consequences of being abandoned by the Spirit, which can lead to eternal damnation. Finney warns that the Spirit's withdrawal is not a sign of God's lack of compassion, but rather a necessary response to the sinner's willful rejection of truth. He urges listeners to recognize the urgency of their spiritual state and the importance of responding to the Spirit's call before it is too late.

Transcript

"And the Lord said--my Spirit shall not always strive with man." Gen. 6:3.

In speaking from this text, I shall pursue the following outline of thought, and attempt to show,

I. What is implied in the assertion, My Spirit shall not always strive with man;

II. What is not intended by the Spirit's striving;

III. What is intended by it;

IV. How it may be known when the Spirit strives with an individual;

V. What is intended by his not striving always;

VI. Why He will not always strive; and

VII. Some consequences of his ceasing to strive with men.

I. What is implied in the assertion--"My Spirit shall not always strive with man?"

1. It is implied in this assertion, that the Spirit does sometimes strive with men. It is nonsense to affirm that He will not strive always, if the fact of his striving sometimes be not implied. Beyond all question the text assumes the doctrine that God by his Spirit does strive sometimes with sinning men.

2. It is also implied that men resist the Spirit. For there can be no strife unless there be resistance. If sinners always yielded at once to the teachings and guidance of the Spirit, there could be no "striving" on the part of the Spirit, in the sense here implied, and it would be altogether improper to use the language here employed. In fact, the language of our text implies long-continued resistance--so long continued that God declares that the struggle shall not be kept up on his part forever.

I am well aware that sinners are prone to think that they do not resist God. They often think that they really want the Spirit of God to be with them, and to strive with them. What, indeed! Think of this! If a sinner really wanted the Spirit of God to convert or to lead him, how could he resist the Spirit? But in fact he does resist the Spirit. What Stephen affirmed of the Jews of his time, is true in general of all sinners--"Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." For if there were no resistance on the sinner's part, there could be no striving on the part of the Spirit. So that it is a mere absurdity that a sinner in a state of mind to resist the Spirit should yet sincerely desire to be led into truth and duty by the Spirit. But sinners are sometimes so deceived about themselves as to suppose that they want God to strive with them, while really they are resisting all He is doing, and are ready to resist all He will do. So blinded to their own true characters, are sinners.

II. But we must notice secondly, what is not intended by the Spirit's striving. Here the main thing to be observed is that it is not any form of physical struggling, or effort whatever. It is not any force applied to our bodies. It does not attempt to urge us literally along toward God or heaven. This is not to be thought of at all.

III. What then is the striving of the Spirit? I answer, it is an energy of God, applied to the mind of man, setting truth before his mind, debating, reasoning, convincing, and persuading. The sinner resists God's claims, cavils and argues against them; and then God by his Spirit meets the sinner and debates with him, somewhat as two men might debate and argue with each other. You are not however to understand that the Holy Ghost does this with an audible voice, to the human ear, but He speaks to the mind and to the heart. The inner ear of the soul can hear its whispers.

Our Saviour taught that when the Comforter should come, He would "reprove the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment." (John 16:7-11.) The term here rendered "reprove" refers in its proper sense to judicial proceedings. When the judge has heard all the testimony and the arguments of counsel, he sums up the whole case, and lays it before the jury, bringing out all the strong points and making them bear with all their condensed and accumulated power, upon the condemnation of the criminal. This is reproving him in the original and legitimate sense of the word used here by our Saviour. Thus the Holy Ghost reproves the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. Thus does the Spirit convince or convict the sinner by testimony, by argument, by arraying all the strong points of the case against him under circumstances of affecting solemnity and power.

IV. How may it be known when the Spirit of God strives with an individual.

Not by direct perception of his agency, through any of your physical senses; for his presence is not manifested to these organs. Not directly by our consciousness; for the only proper subjects of consciousness are the acts and states of our own minds. But we know the presence and agency of the

Spirit by his works. The results He produces are the legitimate proofs of his presence. Thus a person under the Spirit's influence, finds his attention arrested to the great concerns of his soul. The solemn questions of duty and responsibility to God are continually intruding themselves upon his mind. If he is a student over his lesson, his mind is drawn away continually ere he is aware, to think of God and of the judgment to come. He turns his attention back to his books, but soon it is off again. How can he neglect these matters of infinite moment to his future well-being?

So with men of every calling; the Spirit of God turns the mind, and draws it to God and the concerns of the soul. When such results take place, you may know that the Spirit of God is the cause. For who does not know that this drawing and inclining of the mind toward God is by no means natural to the human heart? When it does occur therefore, we may know that the special agency of God is in it.

Again, when a man finds himself convinced of sin, he may know that this is the Spirit's work. Now it is one thing to know one's self to be a sinner, and quite another to feel a realizing sense of it, and to have the truth take hold mightily of the deepest sensibilities of the soul. The latter sometimes takes place. You may see the man's countenance fallen, his eye downcast, his whole aspect is as if he had disgraced himself by some foul crime, or as if he had suddenly lost all the friends he ever had. I have often met with impenitent sinners who looked condemned, as if conscious guilt had taken hold of their inmost soul. They would not be aware that they were revealing in their countenances the deep workings of their hearts, but the observing eye could not help seeing it. I have also seen the same among backslidden professors,--resulting from the same cause--the Spirit of God reproving them of sin.

Sometimes this conviction is of a general and sometimes of a more special nature. It may enforce only the general impression--"I am all wrong--I am utterly odious and hateful to God--my whole heart is a sink of abomination in his sight;" or in other cases it may seize upon some particular form of sin, and hold it up before the sinner's mind, and make him see his infinite odiousness before God for this sin. It may be a sin he has never thought of before, or he may have deemed it a very light matter; but now, through the Spirit, it shall rise up before his mind in such features of ugliness and loathsomeness, that he will abhor himself. He sees sin in a perfectly new light. Many things are sins now, which he never deemed sins before.

Again, the Spirit not only convinces of the fact that such and such things are sins, but convicts the mind of the great guilt and ill-desert of sin. The sinner is made to feel that his sin deserves the direst damnation.

The case of an infidel of my acquaintance may serve to illustrate this. He had lived in succession with two pious wives; had read almost every book then extant on the inspiration of the Scriptures--had disputed, and caviled, and often thought himself to have triumphed over believers in the Bible, and in fact he was the most subtle infidel I ever saw. It was remarkable that in connection with his infidelity he had no just views of sin. He had indeed heard much about some dreadful depravity which had come down in the current of human blood from Adam, and was itself a physical thing; but as usual he had no oppressive consciousness of guilt for having his share of this original taint. His mind consequently was quite easy in respect to the guilt of his own sin.

But at length a change came over him, and his eyes were opened to see the horrible enormity of his guilt. I saw him one day so borne down with sin and shame that he could not look up. He bowed his head upon his knees, covered his face, and groaned in agony. In this state I left him and went to the prayer-meeting. Ere long he came into the meeting as he never came before. As he left the meeting he said to his wife--"You have long known me as a strong-hearted infidel; but my infidelity is all gone. I cannot tell you

what has become of it--it all seems to me as the merest nonsense--I cannot conceive how I could ever have believed and defended it. I seem to myself like a man called to view some glorious and beautiful structure, in order to pass his judgment upon it; but who presumes to judge and condemn it after having caught only a dim glimpse of one obscure corner. Just so have I done in condemning the glorious Bible and the glorious government of God.["]

Now the secret of all this change in his mind towards the Bible lay in the change of his views as to his own sin. Before, he had not been convicted of sin at all; now he sees it in some of its true light, and really feels that he deserves the deepest hell. Of course he now sees the pertinence and beauty and glory of the gospel system. He is now in a position in which he can see clearly one of the strongest proofs of the truth of the Bible--namely, its perfect adaptation to meet the wants of a sinning race.

It is remarkable to see what power there is in conviction for sin to break up and annihilate the delusions of error. For instance, no man can once thoroughly see his own sin, and remain an Universalist, and deem it unjust for God to send him to hell. When I hear a man talking in defence of Universalism, I know he does not understand anything about sin. He has not begun to see his own guilt in its true light. It is the blindest of all mental infatuations to think that the little inconveniences of this life are all that sin deserves. Let a man once see his own guilt, and he will be amazed to think that he ever held such a notion. The Spirit of God, pouring light upon the sinner's mind, will soon use up Universalism.

I once labored in a village in the State of New York where Universalism prevailed extensively. The leading man among them had a sick wife who sympathized with him in sentiment. She being near death, I called to see her, and endeavored to expose the utter fallacy of her delusion. After I had left, her husband returned, and his wife, her eyes being now opened, cried out to him as he entered--"O my dear husband, you are in the way to hell--your Universalism will ruin your soul forever!" He was greatly enraged, and learning that I had been talking with her, his rage was kindled against me. "Where is he now?" said he. "Gone to the meeting," was the reply. "I'll go there and shoot him," he cried; and seizing his loaded pistol, as I was informed, he started off. When he came in I was preaching I think from the text--"Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" I knew at the time nothing about his purpose--nothing about his pistol. He listened awhile--and then all at once in the midst of the meeting he fell back on his seat, and cried out--"O, I am sinking to hell!-- O, God, have mercy on me." Away went his Universalism in a twinkling; he sees his sin, and now he is sinking to hell. This change in him was not my work, for I could produce no such effects as these. I was indeed trying to show from my text what sinners deserve; but the Spirit of God and nothing less, could set home conviction of sin after this sort.

Again, another fruit of the Spirit is developed in the case of those persons who are conscious of great hardness and insensibility. It not unfrequently happens that men suppose themselves to be Christians because they have so much sensibility on religious subjects. To undeceive them, the Spirit directs their attention to some truth that dries up all their sensibility, and leaves their hopes stranded on the sea-beach. Now they are in great agony. "The more I hear," say they, "the less I feel. I was never in the world so far from being convicted of sin. I shall certainly go to hell. I have not a particle of feeling. I cannot feel if I die."

Now the explanation of this singular state is usually this: The Spirit of God sees their danger--sees them deceiving themselves by relying on their feelings, and therefore brings some truths before their minds which array the opposition of their hearts against God and dry up the fountains of their sensibility. Then they see how perfectly callous their hearts are toward God. This is the work of the Spirit.

Again, the Spirit convicts the soul of the guilt of unbelief. Sinners are very apt to suppose that they do believe the gospel. They confound faith with a merely intellectual assent, and so blind themselves as to suppose that they believe God in the sense of gospel faith.

But let the Spirit once reveal their own hearts to them and they will see that they do not believe in God as they believe in their fellow men, and that instead of having confidence in God and resting on his words of promise as they do on men's promises, they do not rest on God at all, but are full of anxiety lest God should fail to fulfill his own words. They see that instead of being child-like and trustful, they are full of trouble, and solicitude, and in fact of unbelief. And they see also, that this is a horribly guilty state of heart. They see the guilt of not resting in his promises--the horrible guilt of not believing with the heart every word God ever uttered.

Now this change is the work of the Spirit. Our Saviour mentions it as one of the effects wrought by the Spirit, that He shall "reprove the world of sin, because they believe not on me." And in fact we find that this is one of the characteristic works of the Spirit. In conversing recently with a man who has been for many years a professor of religion, but living in the seventh chapter to the Romans, he remarked--"I have been thinking of this truth, that God cares for me and loves me, and has through Jesus Christ offered me eternal life; and now I deserve to be damned if I do not believe." Stretching out his pale hand, he said with great energy, "I ought to go to hell if I will not believe." Now all this is the work of the Spirit--this making a man see the guilt and hell-desert of unbelief--this making a sinner see that every thing else is only straw compared with the eternal rock of God's truth.

Again, the Spirit makes men see the danger of dying in their sins. Said a young man, "I am afraid to go to sleep at night, lest I should awake in hell." Sinners often know what this feeling is. I recollect having this thought once impressed upon my mind, and so much agonized was I, that I almost thought myself to be dying on the spot! O, I can never express the terror and the agony of my soul in that hour! Sinner, if you have these feelings, it is a solemn time with you.

Moreover, the Spirit makes sinners feel the danger of being given up of God. Often does it happen that sinners, convicted by the Spirit, are made to feel that if they are not given up already, they are in the most imminent peril of it, and must rush for the gate of life now or never. They see that they have so sinned and have done so much to provoke God to give them over, that their last hope of being accepted is fast dying away. Sinners, have any of you ever felt thus? Have you ever trembled in your very soul lest you should be given over to a reprobate mind before another Sabbath, or perhaps before another morning? If so, you may ascribe this to the Spirit of God.

Yet further; the Spirit often convicts sinners of the great blindness of their minds. It seems to them that their minds are full of solid darkness, as it were a darkness that may be felt.

Now this is really the natural state of the sinner; but he is not sensible of it until enlightened by the Spirit of God. When thus enlightened, he begins to appreciate his own exceeding great blindness. He now becomes aware that the Bible is a sealed book to him--for he finds that though he reads it, its meaning is involved in impenetrable darkness.

Have not some of you been conscious of such an experience as this? Have you not read the Bible with the distressing consciousness that your mind was by no means suitably affected by its truth--indeed, with the conviction that you did not get hold of its truth to any good purpose at all? Thus are men enlightened by the Spirit to see the real state of their case.

Again, the Spirit shows sinners their total alienation from God. I have seen sinners so strongly convicted of this, that they would say right out; "I know that I have not the least disposition to return to God--I am conscious that I don't care whether I have any religion or not."

Often have I seen professed Christians in this state, conscious that their hearts are utterly alienated from God and from all sympathy with his character or government. Their deep backslidings, or their utter want of all religion has been so revealed to their minds by the Spirit, as to become a matter of most distinct and impressive consciousness.

Sinners thus made to see themselves by the Spirit, often find that when they pour out their words before God for prayer, their heart won't go. I once said to a sinner, "Come, now, give up your heart to God." "I will," said he; but in a moment he broke out--"My heart won't go." Have not some of you been compelled to say the same, "My heart won't go?" Then you know by experience one of the fruits of the Spirit's convicting power.

When the Spirit of God is not with men, they can dole out their long prayers before God and never think or seem to care how prayerless their hearts are all the time, and how utterly far from God. But when the Spirit sheds his light on the soul, the sinner sees how black a hypocrite he is. Oh, then he cannot pray so smoothly, so loosely, so self-complacently.

Again, the Spirit of God often convinces men that they are ashamed of Christ, and that in truth they do not wish for religion. It sometimes happens that sinners do not feel ashamed of being thought seriously disposed, until they come to be convicted. Such was the case with myself. I bought my first Bible as a law-book, and laid it by the side of my Blackstone. I studied it as I would any other law-book, my sole object being to find in it the great principles of law. Then I never once thought of being ashamed of reading it. I read it as freely and as openly as I read any other book. But as soon as I became awakened to the concerns of my soul, I put my Bible out of sight. If it were lying on my table when persons came into my office, I was careful to throw a newspaper over it. Ere long, however, the conviction that I was ashamed of God and of his word came over me with overwhelming force, and served to show me the horrible state of my mind toward God. And I suppose that the general course of my experience is by no means uncommon among impenitent sinners.

The Spirit also convicts men of worldly-mindedness. Sinners are always in this state of mind; but are often not fully aware of the fact until the Spirit of God makes them see it. I have often seen men pushing their worldly projects most intensely, but when addressed on the subject they would say, "I don't care much about the world; I am pursuing this business just now chiefly because I want to be doing something;" but when the Spirit shows them their own hearts, they are in agony lest they should never be able to break away from the dreadful power of the world upon their souls. Now they see that they have been the veriest slaves on earth--slaves to the passion for worldly good.

Again, the Holy Spirit often makes such a personal application of the truth as to fasten the impression that the preacher is personal and intends to describe the case and character of him who is the subject of his influence. The individual thus convinced of sin may think that the preacher has in some way come to a knowledge of his character, and intends to describe it. That the preacher means him, and is preaching to him. He wonders who has told the preacher so much about him. All this often takes place when the preacher perhaps does not know that such an one is in the assembly, and is altogether ignorant of his history. Thus the Holy Spirit who knows his heart and his entire history becomes very personal in the

application of truth.

Have any of you this experience? Has it at present or at any other time appeared to you as if the preacher meant you, and that he was describing your case? Then the Spirit of the living God is upon you. I have often seen individuals drop their heads under preaching almost as if they were shot through. They were perhaps unable to look up again during the whole service. Afterwards I have often heard that they thought I meant them, and that others thought so too and perhaps imagined that many eyes were turned on them, and that therefore they did not look up, when in fact neither myself nor any one in the congregation, in all probability, so much as thought of them.

Thus a bow drawn at a venture often lodges an arrow between the joints of the sinner's coat of mail. Sinner, is it so with you?

Again, the Holy Spirit often convinces sinners of the enmity of their hearts against God. Most impenitent sinners, and perhaps all deceived professors, unless convinced to the contrary by the Holy Spirit, imagine that they are on the whole friendly to God. They are far from believing that this carnal mind is enmity against God. They think they do not hate, but on the contrary, that they love God. Now this delusion must be torn away or they must be lost. To do this, the Spirit so orders it that some truths are presented which develop their real enmity against God. The moralist who has been the almost Christian, or the deceived professor, begins to cavil, to find fault, finally to rail; to oppose the preaching and the meetings and the measures and the men. The man perhaps who has a pious wife and who has thought himself and has been thought by her to be almost a Christian, begins by caviling at the truth, finds fault with the measures, and with the manners; then refuses to go to meeting, and finally forbids his wife and family going, and not infrequently his enmity of heart will boil over in a horrible manner. He perhaps has no thought that this boiling up of hell within him is occasioned by the Holy Spirit revealing to him the true state of his heart. His Christian friends also may mistake his case and be ready to conclude that something is wrong in the matter or manners or measures of the preacher that is doing this man a great injury. But beware what you say or do. In many such cases which have come under my own observation, it has turned out that the Holy Spirit was at work in those hearts, revealing to them their real enmity against God. This He does by presenting those truths in that manner and under those circumstances that produce these results. He pushes this process until He compels the soul to see that it is filled with enmity to God, and to what is right; that yet it is not man, but God to whom he is opposed; that it is not error, but truth; not the manner, but the matter; not the measures, but the God of truth which it hates.

The Spirit, moreover, often convicts sinners powerfully of the deceitfulness of their own hearts. Sometimes this conviction becomes really appalling. They see they have been deluding themselves in matters too plain to justify any mistake, and too momentous to admit of any apology for wilful blindness. They are confounded with what they see in themselves.

The Spirit also not infrequently strips the sinner of his excuses, and shows him clearly their great folly and absurdity. I recollect this was one of the first things in my experience in the process of conviction. I lost all confidence in any of my excuses, for I found them to be so foolish and futile that I could not endure them. This was my state of mind before I had ever heard of the work of the Spirit, or knew at all how to judge whether my own mind was under its influence or not. I found that whereas I had been very strong in my excuses and objections, I was now utterly weak, and it seemed to me that any child could overthrow me. In fact I did not need to be overthrown by any body, for my excuses and cavils had sunk to nothing of themselves, and I was deeply ashamed of them. I had effectually worked myself out of all their mazes, so

that they could bewilder me no longer. I have since seen multitudes in the same condition--weak as to their excuses--their old defensive armor all torn off, and their hearts laid naked to the shafts of God's truth.

Now, sinners, have any of you known what this is--to have all your excuses and apologies failing you--to feel that you have no courage and no defensible reasons for pushing forward in a course of sin? If so, then you know what it is to be under the convicting power of the Spirit.

The Spirit convicts men of the folly of seeking salvation in any other way than through Christ alone. Often, without being aware of it, a sinner will be really seeking salvation in some other way than through Christ, and he will be looking to his good deeds--to his own prayers, or the prayers of some Christian friends; but if the Spirit ever saves him, he will tear away these delusive schemes and show him the utter vanity of every other way than through Christ alone. The Spirit will show him that there is but this one way in which it is naturally possible for a sinner to be saved, and that all attempts toward any other way are forever vain and worse than worthless. All self-righteousness must be rejected entirely, and Christ be sought alone.

Have you ever been made to see this? You who are professed Christians, is this your experience?

Again, the Spirit convinces men of the great folly and madness of clinging to an unsanctifying hope. The Bible teaches that every one who has the genuine gospel hope purifies himself, even as Christ is pure. In this passage, the apostle John plainly means to affirm a universal proposition. He states a universal characteristic of the Christian hope. Whoever has a Christian hope should ask, Do I purify myself even as Christ is pure? If not, then mine is not the true gospel hope.

But yet thousands of professed Christians have a most inefficient hope. What is it? Does it really lead them to purify themselves as Christ is pure? Nothing like it. It is not a hope that they shall see Christ as He is, and be forever with Him, and altogether like Him too; but it is mainly a hope that they shall escape hell, and go as an alternative to some unknown heaven.

Such professed Christians cannot but know that their experience lacks the witness of their own consciences that they are living for God and bearing His image. If such are ever saved, they must first be convinced of the folly of a hope that leaves them unsanctified.

Ye professors of religion who have lived a worldly life so long, are you not ashamed of your hope? Have you not good reason to be ashamed of a hope that has no more power than yours has had? Are there not many in this house who in the honesty of their hearts must say, "Either there is no power in the gospel, or I don't know anything about it?" For the gospel affirms as a universal fact of all those who are not under the law but under grace, "sin shall not have dominion over you." Now will you go before God and say, "Lord, thou hast said, 'Sin shall not have dominion over you;' but, Lord, that is all false, for I believe the gospel and am under grace, but sin still has dominion over me?" No doubt in this case there is a mistake somewhere; and it becomes you to ask solemnly, Shall I charge this mistake and falsehood upon God, or shall I admit that it must be alone in myself?

The apostle Paul has said, "The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." Is it so to you?

He has also said, "Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Do you know this by your own experience? He adds also that we "rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also; knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience;

and experience, hope; and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."

Is all this in accordance with your experience, professed Christian? Is it true that your hope makes not ashamed? Does it produce such glorious fruits unto holiness as are here described? If you were to try your experience by the word of the living God, and open your heart to be searched by the Spirit, would not you be convinced that you do not embrace the gospel in reality?

Again, the Spirit convinces men that all their goodness is selfish; and that self is the end of all their efforts, of all their prayers and religious exercises. I once spent a little time in the family of a man who was a leading member in a Presbyterian Church. He said to me, "What should you think of a man who is praying for the Spirit every day, but does not get the blessing?" I answered, "I should presume that he is praying selfishly." "But suppose," replied he, "that he is praying for the sake of promoting his own happiness?" "He may be purely selfish in that," I replied; "the devil might do as much, and would perhaps do just the same if he supposed he could make himself happier by it." I then cited the prayer of David: "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me: restore unto me the joys of thy salvation: then will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee." This seemed to be new doctrine to him, and he turned away--as I found afterwards, in great anger and trouble. In the first gush of feeling he prayed that God would cut him down and send him to hell, lest he should have to confess his sin and shame before all the people. He saw that in fact his past religion had been all selfish--but the dread of confessing this was at first appalling. He saw however the possibility of mistake, that his hopes had been all delusive, and that he had been working his self-deceived course fast down toward the depths of hell.

Finally, it is the Spirit's work to make self-deceived men feel that they are now having their last call from the Spirit. When this impression is made, let it by all means be heeded. It is God's own voice to the soul. Out of a great multitude of cases under my observation, in which God has distinctly made sinners feel that the present was their last call, I do not recollect one in which it did not prove to be so. This is a truth of solemn moment to the sinner, and ought to make the warning voice of God ring in his ear like the forewarning knell of the second death.

V. What is intended by the Spirit's not striving always?

The meaning I take to be, not that he will at some period withdraw from among mankind, but that He will withdraw from the individual in question, or perhaps as in the text from a whole generation of sinners. In its general application now, the principle seems to be that the Spirit will not follow the sinner onward down to his grave--that there will be a limit to his efforts in the case of each sinner, and that this limit is perhaps ordinarily reached a longer or a shorter time before death. At some uncertain, awful point he will reach and pass it; and it therefore becomes every sinner to understand his peril of grieving the Spirit forever away.

VI. We, are next to inquire, WHY God's Spirit will not strive always.

I answer, not because God is not compassionate, forbearing, slow to anger and great in mercy;--not because He gets out of patience and acts unreasonably--by no means; nothing of this at all. But the reasons are:

1. Because longer striving will do the sinner no good. For by the very laws of mind, conversion must be effected through the influence of truth. But it is a known law of mind that truth once and again resisted, loses its power upon the mind that resists it. Every successive instance of resistance weakens its power. If

the truth does not take hold with energy when fresh, it is not likely to do so ever after. Hence when the Spirit reveals truth to the sinner, and he hardens himself against it, and resists the Spirit, there remains little hope for him. We may expect God to give him up for lost. So the Bible teaches.

2. If again we ask, Why does God cease to strive with sinners? The answer may be, Because to strive longer not only does the sinner no good, but positive evil. For guilt is graduated by light. The more light the greater guilt. Hence more light revealed by the Spirit and longer striving might serve only to augment the sinner's guilt, and of course his final woe. It is better then for the sinner himself, after all hope of his repentance is gone, that the Spirit should leave him, than that his efforts should be prolonged in vain, to no other result than to increase the sinner's light and guilt, and consequently his endless curse. It is in this case a real mercy to the sinner, that God should withdraw His Spirit and let him alone.

3. Because sinners sin willfully when they resist the Holy Ghost. It is the very work of the Spirit to throw light before their minds. Of course in resisting the Spirit they must sin against light. Hence their dreadful guilt.

We are often greatly shocked with the bold and daring sins of men who may not after all have much illumination of the Spirit, and of course comparatively little guilt. But when God's ministers come to the souls of men with His messages of truth, and men despise or neglect them; when God's providence also enforces His truth, and still men resist, they are greatly guilty. How much more so when God comes by His Spirit, and they resist God under the blazing light of His Spirit's illuminations! How infinitely aggravated is their guilt now!

4. Again, their resistance tempts the forbearance of God. Never do sinners so grievously tempt the forbearance of God as when they resist His Spirit. You may see this developed in the Jews of Stephen's time. "Ye stiff-necked," said H[h]e, "and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did so do ye." He had been following down the track of their national history, and running fearlessly across their Jewish prejudices, laboring in the deep sincerity and faithfulness of his soul, to set before them their guilt in persecuting and murdering the Son of God. And what do they do? Enraged at these rebukes, they gnashed on him with their teeth--they set upon him with the spirit of demons, and stoned him to death, although they saw the very glory of God beaming in his eye and on his countenance as if it had been an angel's. And did not this fearful deed of theirs seal up their damnation? Read the history of their nation and see. They had tempted God to the last limit of His forbearance; and now what remained for them but swift and awful judgments? The wrath of God arose against them, and there was no remedy. Their resistance of the Holy Ghost pressed the forbearance of God till it could bear no more.

It is a solemn truth that sinners tempt God's forbearance most dangerously when they resist His Spirit. Think how long some of you have resisted the Holy Spirit. The claims of God have been presented and pressed again and again, but you have as often put them away. You have said unto God, "Depart from us; we desire not the knowledge of thy ways." And now have you not the utmost reason to expect that God will take you at your word?

5. There is a point beyond which forbearance is no virtue. This is and must be true in all governments. No government could possibly be maintained which should push the indulgence of a spirit of forbearance toward the guilty beyond all limits. There must be a point beyond which God cannot go without peril to His government; and over this point we may be assured He will never pass.

Suppose we should as often see old, gray-headed sinners converted as youthful sinners, and this should be the general course of things. Would not this work ruin to God's government--ruin even to sinners themselves? Would not sinners take encouragement from this, and hold on in their sins till their lusts were worn out, and till they themselves should rot down in their corruptions? They would say, "We shall be just as likely to be converted in our old age, putrid with long-indulged lusts, and rank with the unchecked growth of every abomination of the heart of man, as if we were to turn to God in the freshness of our youth;--so let us have the pleasures of sin first, and the unwelcomeness of religion when the world can give us no more to enjoy."

But God means to have men converted young if at all, and one reason for this is that He intends to convert the world, and therefore must have laborers trained up for the work in the morning of life. If He were to make no discrimination between the young and the aged, converting from each class alike, or chiefly from the aged, the means for converting the world must utterly fail, and in fact on such a scheme the result would be that no sinners at all would be converted. There is therefore a necessity for the general fact that sinners must submit to God in early life.

VII. Consequences of the Spirit's ceasing to strive with men.

One consequence will be a confirmed hardness of heart. It is inevitable that the heart will become much more hardened, and the will more fully set to do evil.

Another consequence will be a confirmed opposition to religion. This will be wont to manifest itself in dislike to every thing on the subject, often with great impatience and peevishness when pressed to attend to the subject seriously. Perhaps they will refuse to have anything said to themselves personally, so settled is their opposition to God and his claims.

You may also expect to see them opposed to revivals and to gospel ministers, and pre-eminently to those ministers who are most faithful to their souls. All those means of promoting revivals which are adapted to rouse the conscience, will be peculiarly odious to their hearts. Usually such persons become sour in their dispositions, misanthropic, haters of all Christians, delighting if they dare to retail slander and abuse against those whose piety annoys and disturbs their stupid repose in sin.

Another consequence of being forsaken of the Spirit is, that men will betake themselves to some refuge of lies, and will settle down in some form of fatal error. I have often thought it almost impossible for men to embrace fatal error heartily, unless first forsaken by the Spirit of God. From observation of numerous cases, I believe this to be the case with the great majority of universalists. They are described by Paul. "They receive not the love of the truth that they may be saved, and for this cause God sends them strong delusion that they should believe a lie." They hate the truth--are more than willing to be deceived--are restive when pressed with gospel claims, and therefore are ready to grasp at any form of delusion which sets aside these claims and boldly asserts--"Ye shall not surely die." It has long been an impression on my mind that this is the usual course of feeling and thought which leads to universalism. There may be exceptions; but the mass go into this delusion from the starting point of being abandoned by the Spirit. Thus abandoned, they become cross and misanthropic--they hate all Christians, and all those truths that God and his people love. This could not be the case if they had the love of God in their hearts. It could not well be the case if they were enlightened and restrained by the present agency of the divine Spirit.

Again, generally those who are left of God, come to have a seared conscience. They are distinguished by great insensibility of mind. They are of choice blind and hardened in respect to the nature and guilt of sin.

Although their intelligence affirms that sin is wrong, yet they do not feel it, or care for it. They can know the truth and yet be reckless of its application to their own hearts and lives. God has left them, and of course the natural tendencies of a depraved heart are developed without restraint.

Again, this class of sinners will inevitably wax worse and worse. They become loose in habits--lax in their observance of the Sabbath--slide backwards in regard to temperance and all kindred moral subjects;--slip into some of the many forms of sin and perhaps vice and crime; if they have been conscientious against the use of tobacco, they relinquish their conscientiousness and throw a loose rein on their lusts; in short they are wont to wax worse and worse in every branch of morals, and often become so changed that you would hardly recognize them. It will be no strange thing if they become profane swearers--steal a little and anon a good deal; and if God does not restrain them, they go down by a short and steep descent to the depths of hell.

Another consequence of being abandoned by the Spirit will be certain damnation. There can be no mistake about this. It is just as certain as if they were already there.

This state is not always attended with apathy of feeling. There may be at times a most intense excitement of the sensibility. The Bible describes the case of some who "sin willfully after they have received a knowledge of the truth, and there remains for them only a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation." Some persons of this description I have seen, and such agony and such wretchedness I pray God I may never see again. I have seen them, the very pictures of despair and horror. Their eyes fully open to see their ruined state--exclaiming, "I know I am abandoned of God forever--I have sinned away my day of hope and mercy, and I know I never shall repent--I have no heart to repent, although I know that I must, or be damned;" such language as this they utter with a settled, positive tone, and an air of agony and despair which is enough to break a heart of stone.

Another consequence often is that Christians find themselves unable to pray in faith for such sinners. There are some in almost every community for whom Christians cannot pray. It is I believe common for many Christians without being aware of each other's state, to have a similar experience. For example, several Christians are praying in secret for some one individual, and with considerable freedom up to a certain moment, and then they find that they can pray for him no longer. They chance to meet together, and one says--"I have been praying a long time with great interest for that certain impenitent sinner; but at a particular time I found myself all shut up; I could not get hold of the Lord again for him, and never have been able to since." Says another, and another--"I have felt just so myself. I did not know that any one else felt as I have, but you have described my case precisely."

Now if you will go to that sinner, he will tell you a story which will develop the whole case, and show that he came at that eventful moment to some fatal determination, grieved the Spirit, and was abandoned of God. The Spirit ceased to strive with him, and consequently ceased to elicit prayer in his behalf in the hearts of God's people.

Finally when God has ceased to strive with sinners, no means whatever, employed for the purpose can be effectual for their salvation. If you, sinner, have passed that dreadful point, you will no more be profited by my preaching though I were to preach to you five thousand sermons; nay, you could not be profited though an angel should come and preach to you, or even Christ himself. All would be only in vain. You are left of God to fill up the measure of your iniquities.

REMARKS.

1. Christians may understand how to account for the fact already noticed, that there are some for whom they cannot pray. Even while they are walking with God, and trying to pray for particular individuals, they may find themselves utterly unable to do so; and this may be the explanation. I would not however in such a case take it for granted that all is right with myself, for perhaps it is not; but if I have the best evidence that all is right between myself and God, then I must infer that God has forsaken that sinner and does not wish me to pray any longer for him.

2. Sinners should be aware that light and guilt keep pace with each other. They are augmented and lessened together. Hence the solemn responsibility of being under the light and the strivings of the Spirit.

While enlightened and pressed to duty by the Spirit sinners are under the most solemn circumstances that can ever occur in their whole lives. Indeed no period of the sinner's existence through its eternal duration can be so momentous as this. Yes, sinner, while the Spirit of God is pleading and striving with you, angels appreciate the solemnity of the hour--they know that the destiny of your soul is being decided for eternity. What an object of infinite interest! An immortal mind on the pivot of its eternal destiny--God debating and persuading--he resisting, and the struggle about to be broken off as hopeless forever. Suppose sinner, you could set yourself aside and could look on and be a spectator of such a scene. Were you ever in a court of justice when the question of life and death was about to be decided? The witnesses have all been heard--the counsel have been heard--it is announced that the jury are ready to deliver their verdict. Now pause and mark the scene. Note the anxiety depicted in every countenance and how eagerly and yet with what awful solemnity they wait for the decision about to be made; and with good reason--for a question of momentous interest is to be decided. But if this question, involving only the temporal life, is so momentous, how much more so is the sinner's case when the life of the soul for eternity is pending!! O how solemn while the question still pends--while the Spirit still strives, and still the sinner resists, and none can tell how soon the last moment of the Spirit's striving may come!

This ought to be the most solemn world in the universe. In other worlds, the destinies of the souls are already fixed. It is so in hell. All there is fixed and changeless forever. It is a solemn thing indeed for a sinner to go to hell, but the most solemn point in the whole duration of his existence is that one in which the decision is made.

O what a world is this! Throughout all its years and centuries we cannot see one moment on whose tender point there hangs not a balancing of the question of eternal life or eternal death! And is this a place to trifle?--this a place to be mad and foolish and vain? Ah, no! it were more reasonable to trifle in any other world than in this. The awful destinies of the soul are being determined here. Heaven sees it and hell too, and all are filled with solicitude, swelling almost to agony;--but you who are the subjects of all this anxiety--you can trifle and play the fool and dance on the brink of everlasting woe. The Psalmist says--

"I heard the wretch profanely boast,

Till at thy frown he fell;

His honors in a dream were lost,

And he awoke in hell."

God represents the sinner as on a slippery steep, his feet just sliding--on the very verge of an awful chasm--God holding him up a short moment, and he trifling away even this short moment in mad folly. All

hearts in heaven and in hell are beating and throbbing with intense emotion: but he can be reckless! O what madness!

If sinners duly estimated this danger of resisting the Spirit, they would be more afraid of it than of anything else whatever. They would deem no other dangers worthy of a moment's thought or care compared with this.

Again, it is a very common thing for sinners to grieve away the Spirit long before death. So I believe, although some, I am aware, are greatly opposed to this doctrine. Do you doubt it? Think of almost the whole Jewish nation in the time of the Saviour, given up to unbelief and reprobacy--abandoned of the Spirit of God--yet they sinned against far less light and of course with much less guilt than sinners now do. If God could give them up then, why may He not do so with sinners now? If He could give up the whole population of the world in Noah's time when he alone stood forth a preacher of righteousness, why may He not give up individual sinners now who are incomparably more guilty than they, because they have sinned against greater light than had ever shone then? O it is infinitely cruel to sinners themselves to conceal from them this truth. Let them know that they are in peril of grieving away the Spirit beyond recall, long before they die. This truth ought to be proclaimed over all the earth. Let its echo ring out through every valley and over every mountain-top, the world around. Let every living sinner hear it and take the timely warning!

Again, we see why so few aged sinners are converted. The fact is striking and unquestionable. Take the age of sixty, and count the number converted past that age. You will find it small indeed. Few and scattered are they, like beacons on mountain-tops, just barely enough to prevent the aged from utter despair of ever being converted. I am aware that infidels seize upon this fact to extort from it a cavil against religion, saying, "How does it happen that the aged and wise, whose minds are developed by thought and experience, and who have passed by the period of warm youthful passion, never embrace the gospel?" They would fain have it, that none but children and women become religious, and that this is to be accounted for on the ground that the Christian religion rests on its appeal to the sensibilities, and not to the intelligence. But infidels make a most egregious mistake in this inference of theirs. The fact under consideration should be referred to an entirely different class of causes. The aged are converted but rarely, because they have grieved away the Spirit--have become entangled in the mazes of some loved and soul-ruinous delusion, and hardened in sin past the moral possibility of being converted. Indeed, it would be unwise on the part of God to convert many sinners in old age;--it would be too great a temptation for human nature to bear. At all the earlier periods of life, sinners would be looking forward to old age as the time for conversion.

I have already said what I wish here to repeat--that it is an awfully interesting moment when God's Spirit strives with sinners. I have reason to know that the Spirit is striving with some of you. Even within the past week your attention has been solemnly arrested, and God has been calling upon you to repent. And now are you aware that while God is calling, you must listen--that when He speaks, you should pause and give Him your attention? Does God call you away from your lesson, and are you replying--O, I must, I must get my lesson? Ah, your lesson! and what is your first and chief lesson? "Prepare to meet thy God." But you say--"O the bell will toll in a few minutes, and I have not got my lesson!!["] Yes, sinner, soon the great bell will toll--unseen spirits will seize hold of the bell-rope and toll the dread death-knell of eternity, echoing the summons--come to judgment;--and the bell will toll, toll, TOLL! and where sinner, will you be then! Are you prepared? Have you got that one great lesson--"Prepare to meet thy God?"

In the long elapsing ages, of your lost doom you will be asked, how and why you came into this place of torment; and you will have to answer--"Oh, I was getting my lesson there in Oberlin when God came by his Spirit, and I could not stop to hear his call! So I exchanged my soul for my lesson! O what a fool was I!!"

Let me ask the people of God, should you not be awake in such an hour as this? How many sinners during the past week have besought you to pray for their perishing souls? And have you no heart to pray? How full of critical interest and peril are these passing moments? Did you ever see the magnetic needle of the compass vacillate, quiver, quiver, and finally settle down fixed to its position? So with the sinner's destiny today.

Sinners, think of your destiny, as being now about to assume its fixed position. Soon you will decide it forever and forever!

Do you say, let me first go to my room, and there I will give myself up to God? No, sinner, no! go not away hence in your sin; for now is your accepted time--now--today, after so long a time--now is the only hour of promise--now is perhaps the last hour of the Spirit's presence and grace to your soul!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/the-spirit-not-striving-always/>

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