

Traditions of the Elders

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney's sermon argues that traditions and human interpretations can break the power of God's moral government over mind, leading to a distorted view of the law and its designs.

Scripture: Matthew 15:6, Mark 7:8

Topics: "The Power of the Gospel", "Tradition vs. Commandment"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the dangers of adhering to human traditions that undermine God's commandments, emphasizing how the Pharisees' oral traditions rendered the law of God ineffective. He illustrates that these traditions often distort the true nature of God's moral law, leading to self-righteousness and a misunderstanding of the necessity of atonement. Finney warns that such traditions can blind individuals to their need for repentance and the transformative power of the gospel. He calls for a return to the pure teachings of Scripture, free from human interpretations that dilute the truth. Ultimately, he urges believers to recognize the importance of obedience to God's law as a reflection of genuine faith.

Transcript

MATTHEW XV. 6.--"Thus have ye made the commandment of God, of none effect by your tradition."

The government which God exercises over the universe of mind, is a moral government, it is not of course, administered by direct physical agency; compelling mind to act, in the same manner, in which the physical laws of the material universe operate in the world of matter. Motives are the grand instruments of moving mind.

God's moral government is made up of considerations, and inducements, designed, and calculated to influence the minds of intelligent creatures, to pursue that course of conduct, which will in the highest manner, promote the glory of God, their own interest, and the happiness of the universe. It lays down a definite, and perfect rule of feeling and of action. Its precept marks, with the clear light of sun beams, the exact course of duty. Its sanctions hold out on the one hand, all the blessedness of everlasting life; and on the other, denounces against offenders, all the pains of everlasting death. Thus holding before the sinner's feet, the clear lamp of truth, and in its awful penalty, gathering around him on every hand, over his head, and beneath his feet, all the moving considerations that heaven, and earth and hell can present, to hold his mind in an exact course of obedience. The law of God was clearly revealed to the Jews, but its power was often broken, its influence over mind paralyzed and destroyed, by a variety of oral traditions, which

were handed down from one generation to another; which were held as of equal authority with the written law. They were often the corrupt glosses of the Jewish doctors, and not unfrequently mere evasions of the spirit, and meaning of the written law. We have an instance of this, in the verses connected with the text.

The Jewish doctors had a tradition, that it was unlawful to eat without first washing their hands. To this tradition, Christ's disciples paid no regard. But as these traditions were held in great veneration by the multitude, the Scribes and Pharisees, made the disciples' disregard of them the occasion of reproaching Christ, and demanded of him "why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the Elders?" Christ rebuked them by answering, "why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? for God commanded, saying, honor thy father and mother, and he that curseth father or mother, let him die the death; but ye say, whosoever shall say to his father or mother, it is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me, and honoreth not his father and mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition." The commandment to honor the father and mother, included the duty of providing for them, in case they were in necessitous circumstances; but the tradition of the Elders evaded this requirement, and taught, that if the child would give his property to God, or dedicated it to religious purposes, and made no provision for his aged parents he was blameless. Thus, by this evasion, nullifying the requirement, and absolutely setting aside the commandment of God.

It has always been the policy of Satan, since the world began, to break the power of moral government over mind; to introduce confusion, rebellion, and damnation, into the universe of God.

The influence of motive over mind, is in some respects analogous to the law of gravitation in the material universe. It does not indeed operate by physical force, as does the law of gravitation; but still, motive is designed to hold the same place in the world of mind, that gravitation holds in the world of matter. And as in the material universe, universal desolation would be the consequence of breaking the power of gravitation; so in the world of mind. Destroy the power of motive, and universal anarchy, and misrule, will fill the universe. Every thing therefore which tends to hide the truth, to becloud the minds of men in ignorance, to give them erroneous notions of duty, and of the requirements of God; all evasions and misrepresentations of the true nature and tendency of his commands, are calculated to make them void, to subvert their tendency, and to defeat the very object for which they were enacted. Thus the corrupt glosses, and traditional evasions of the Jews had entirely blinded the Jewish nation. Their carnal interpretation of the law, their traditional explanations of the prophets, and of the commandments of God, had so shaped and modified the views, and doctrinal sentiments of the nation, that they had entirely misapprehended the nature and design of the Messiah's kingdom which they had so long expected. Notwithstanding the typical sacrifices of the ceremonial law, and all the institutions that were designed to point out the nature, and design of the advent of Christ; still these traditional delusions had been so great, and their expectations and views of what the Messiah would be, were so entirely erroneous, that when he came, they did not know him; his doctrine they considered as heresy, his claims to the Messiahship, as blasphemous. Hence the nation rose up, and rejected, and persecuted, and murdered him. But after his resurrection, and the pouring out of his spirit on the day of Pentecost, the traditions of the Jewish doctors were discarded by the Christian Church. For a short time, the clear, unadulterated truth of God shone upon the world. Its power was instantly manifested. When separated from error, it poured its steady lustre in upon the darkness of the moral world, like the mid-day sun. Converts to Christianity were multiplied, as drops of the morning dew. Judaism gave way before it; the multiform systems of pagan idolatry shrunk away before its glories; and earth caught and echoed back the hallelujahs of heaven. But in the midst of this bright day, and while some of the inspired penmen were yet alive, the corrupt philosophy of men,

began to introduce new traditions to break the power of truth. Men began to interpret the Scriptures by the corrupt standards of the erroneous philosophy. The truth became obscured, its power was broken, its influence over mind less and less manifest; until a day of darkness came, which spread the pall of midnight over ages of the world's history, and peopled hell with millions of our race.

When it was seen that the gospel had lost its power, instead of ascribing it to the fact that it was corrupted, that human glosses, and the traditions of men, had broken its influence over mind; instead of understanding that the various manifest inconsistencies with which their traditions had encumbered it, had palsied the arm of its power, and blighted the prospects of the Church, they went on with their speculations, sat quietly down and very learnedly endeavored to account for the fact that its glory was departed, by ascribing it to the mysterious sovereignty of God.

These traditions became multiplied to an enormous extent in the popish church, until such a thing as true conversion to God, was hardly known among them. Many of these traditions were rejected by the reformers, and light enough broke in upon the world, once more to break its slumbers, and there is reason to believe, to bring many souls to Christ. But still the effects were limited. The reformation was but partial. The gospel had not yet its primitive effect. Something was manifestly wanting, to unbeccloud the glorious sun of righteousness, that through the gospel, he might shine in his full strength.

The systems of mental philosophy that still prevailed, and by which standards, men were continually interpreting the word of God; introduced embarrassments and contradiction, mystery, and absurdity into the gospel; perplexed and confounded the human mind, and has to the present day clogged the chariot wheels of his mercy, and in a great measure, set aside, and destroyed the power of the commandment of God.

I will now mention a few of the most apparent designs of the moral law, together with some of the traditions and dogmas of men, that have broken its power. The following are among the manifest designs of this law.

1. To exhibit the benevolence of God. A law is the expressed will of the lawgiver. It is a declaration of his disposition towards his subjects, embodying, and holding forth his real sentiments and feelings concerning them. It is the exact portraiture of his heart. We have only to look into the two great precepts that comprise the whole law and the prophets to learn that God is love. These two precepts enjoin pure and perfect love; supreme love to God, and the same love to our fellows as we bear to ourselves; this is a universal rule of right, for the government of his kingdom. Universal obedience to this law would of course result in universal happiness. Mind is so constituted, that benevolent affections are the sources of happiness. If the benevolence, therefore, which the law requires were universally exercised, and in the degree which the law prescribes, universal good-will, and peace, and joy would fill the earth.

The justice of, [sic.] God is also strongly exhibited in this law. It requires of man, just that love towards himself which is reasonable and right; and just that perfect regard in heart and life to the welfare of our fellow men, and nothing more nor less than is perfectly right.

Another design of the moral law is to convince men of sin. This it does by putting in their hand a perfect rule of action; by holding strongly before their eyes, a pure moral mirror that reflects the exact moral character of every thought, word and deed. It is the rule by which every action must be measured;--the delicate scale of the sanctuary, in which every thought and affection must be weighed.

Its design is also to promote humility. By comparing the life, thought and affections with this holy law, the sinner finds that all is wrong. On being weighed in this balance he finds himself wanting. His self-complacency is destroyed, and his pride is humbled.

Another design of the law is to destroy self-righteousness, and to teach men their need of atonement, and a Saviour.

A further design is to promote holiness and happiness among men. To show them the impossibility of being happy without being holy; and that without perfect holiness no man shall see the Lord. To press every where upon the hearts and consciences of men their obligation to universal and perfect benevolence; and to convict them of Sin in every instance in which they come short of it.

In short, it is manifestly designed, and calculated to declare the perfection of God, and the total depravity of man. For as it is a faithful portrait of the perfection of God's moral character on the one hand; so it is a faithful witness of the entire depravity of man on the other.

But all these designs have been defeated in multitudes of instances by the traditions of men. Pharisees, both of the ancient, and modern stamp, have defeated these designs, by virtually altering the precept. Some of them have made obedience to consist in mere outward conformity to the law of God, regardless of the state of the heart; but the law principally regards the heart. It is the heart, or the design with which an action is performed of which the law takes cognizance. It gives no credit for the outward action unless it proceed from a right design. It must be the promptings of love, that gives existence to the action. It must be at the bidding of holy principle that the action is performed to be recognized as virtue by the law of God. Does the man pray or preach, or give alms to the poor, or read his bible, or go to church? unless these, or any other actions are prompted by the love of God in the heart, they are not obedience, they are not virtue, for still the law thunders forth its claims, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself. No outward conduct then, however sanctimonious or precise, is to be regarded as obedience to the law of God, unless it flow from love. It must be manifest, therefore, that to make outward morality constitute obedience to this law, is to defeat one of its principal designs. Instead of convicting of sin, it is calculated to foster pride. Instead of exhibiting the true character of God, it holds him forth merely as the promoter of cold, dry, morality. Instead of making men humble, showing them their need of a Saviour, it leads to self-complacency; to stumble at the doctrine of atonement; to misunderstand, and reject the gospel.

It was this view of the moral law, so extensively embraced and promulgated by the Pharisees, that led the Jewish nation to reject and crucify the Saviour. They rejected the righteousness of God, and went about to establish their own righteousness, by an outward conformity to the law; and thus supposing themselves to yield obedience to the law, how should they understand the necessity of an atonement, the righteousness of Christ, and justification by faith alone. So it is with the Pharisees of the present day; overlooking the spirituality of God's law, and supposing their cold, dry, outward morality, to be good in the sight of God, and what the law requires; they wrap the filthy garments of their own righteousness about them, walk in the light of their own fire, warm themselves with sparks of their own kindling, and must lie down in sorrow.

Again there are others, who make the law of God of no effect, by regarding it simply as of a negative character, as designed to prohibit the outbreakings of positive selfishness, rather than as requiring the existence and practice of all positive benevolence and virtue. These, content themselves with declaiming against outbreaking sins, regarding the law, simply, as prohibitory, they employ themselves in resisting the

tide of corruption as it flows from the deep fountain of the heart, without enjoining and insisting upon the positive character of the law, as requiring every creature of God to devote all his powers to his service and giving himself up to doing good and promoting the interest of Christ's kingdom.

The religion of these individuals, of course, corresponds with their view of the law. It is of a merely negative character; inasmuch as they do nothing very bad, as they abstain from those outbreking sins that would disgrace them in the eyes of men; they imagine themselves to be Christians. They are aware that they do not give themselves up to acts of benevolence, that they do not deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow Christ; that they do not hold all their possessions as stewards, account their time and talents and all they have and are as belonging to Christ, and to be used only for his glory. They know that they effect little or no good in the world, but that they content themselves with doing nothing very bad. Now this imagination that this is true religion, and that they are Christians, is founded upon their sad and fundamental mistake of the nature of the law of God. Right views of the law, would annihilate these false hopes, would at once sweep away their refuge of lies, and bring them to a better acquaintance with God and with themselves. But it is manifest, that much of what is called religion in the present age, is this spurious negative kind of piety, that contents itself with doing nothing openly wrong, without doing what is right. Ask such a professor whether he is doing any good, he will tell you no, not that he knows of--but that he is doing nothing very bad. Thus the high claims of the law are set aside, its design is perverted and the hypocrite rests quietly in his sins.

Again, the Antinomians make void the commandment of God, by setting it aside as a rule of action. Antinomian is a compound word, signifying without law. The sect originated in the days of the Apostles. Their peculiarity lies in supposing that the gospel was designed to release Christians from their obligation to obey the moral law, it grew out of a perversion of the doctrine of justification by faith. The Jewish doctors had taught that men were to be saved only by yielding a perfect outward conformity to the moral and ceremonial laws. In opposition to this, Paul taught, that by the works of the law, no flesh can be justified; for two reasons, first, because all men had broken the law already, and secondly, because no subsequent obedience however perfect, could make restitution for past disobedience. That all men are, therefore, already condemned by the law. Justification, in the New Testament, is synonymous with pardon and acceptance. The atonement of Christ, is therefore, the only ground of pardon, and those who are saved, are justified, solely, by faith in Christ, irrespective of any legal righteousness of their own. This sentiment was soon perverted by the Antinomians who maintained that if men are justified by faith alone without the works of the law, that good works were unnecessary, that faith in Christ is substituted for obedience to the law of God; overlooking the fact, that without personal holiness no man shall see the Lord.

Multitudes of this sect, have existed in different ages of the world, and in almost all parts of the Church; they have not indeed always been known by this name, but thousands have and still do manifest their peculiarities of belief, and practice. They may in general be known by the fact, that when holiness of heart and life are strongly insisted on, they complain that they are not fed, that this is legal preaching, that it is not the gospel, but that it is going back to the law. They seem to entertain the vain imagination, that the gospel is designed to repeal the moral law; not only to set aside the execution of its penalty, in the case of believers, in Christ; but also to discharge them from the obligation to obey the law, they render the commandment of no effect. They array Christ, and his gospel against the moral government of God, settle down in their self-righteousness, render it impossible for either law or gospel to sanctify them, and "utterly perish in their own corruption." For it is manifest, that if a person professing faith in Christ, do not live as

holily and unblameably as if he expected to be saved by his works. In other words, if he is less strict in life, and indulges in more sin than if he were to be saved by the law, he is turning the grace of God into licentiousness, making Christ the minister of sin--perverting and abusing the gospel, and is virtually, and in heart, an Antinomian. This is making the gospel a license to sin, and to break the law, and thus Christ is set forth as the apologist for sin, as saving those who make his gospel the ground of encouragement for committing those sins which they would not dare to commit did they depend upon their own obedience for justification.

Again, others make void the law of God, and render it of no effect, by denying its penalty. There are two kinds of Universalists, who hold traditions that nullify the power of moral government. The penalty of a law, is the motive held out by the lawgiver, to induce obedience to the precept; the greater the penalty, the more weighty, and influential is the motive to obedience. The less the penalty, the feebler, and the more inoperative are the motives. Destroy the penalty entirely, and you destroy all motive to obedience, except what is contained in the nature of the precept. If indeed the penalty is destroyed or taken away, it is no longer a law; it is a virtual repeal of the law, for the precept without a penalty is only advice, which may be received or rejected at pleasure.

The two kinds of Universalists, to which I have adverted, are, no hell-ites, and limitarians, or restorationists. The former maintain, that men neither deserve, nor receive, any other punishment for sin, than what they receive in this life. The latter, that there will be a limited punishment in a future world; that when they have been punished according to their sins, they will be translated from hell to heaven. Both sects, agreeing in the alleged fact, that all mankind will be saved. The no hell-ites set aside entirely the penalty of the law of God, and regard the sufferings of this life, as the natural and only evil consequences of sin to man. The latter fritter away the penalty, and reduce it to an indefinable something the amount or duration of which they do not pretend to know. If it be not eternal, however, it is but a finite, instead of an infinite sanction. However long it may be, if it has an end, it is infinitely less than eternal. If it be but temporary, it is infinitely less solemn, awful, impressive, commanding, and influential, than an eternal penalty.

The sanctions of moral law, I have said, are designed to hold the same place in the moral, that the law of gravitation does in the material world. The mode of their operation is not the same, for gravitation acts by force, it is the law of matter, and can only be administered by force. Moral law is the law of mind; its sanctions act not by force, but are designed and calculated, to secure a voluntary obedience; and as the law of gravitation holds the sun, moon, and planetary system in their stations and courses; so the motives of moral government are designed to preserve in their stations and in obedience, the voluntary agents under the government of God. Thus while the reality of the threatened penalty was kept steadily before the mind of Adam, he persevered in obedience; he stood like the stars and planets in their station, balanced by the universal law of gravitation. But as soon as his confidence in that was lost, he fell. Annihilate the law of gravitation, and suns, and moons, and planets, rushing from their orbits, would run lawless through the universe; universal disorder, and confusion would be the instantaneous consequence; wave after wave of desolation would roll over the universe of God. So Adam, standing at the head of moral beings, as it regards this world, stood fast, while the deep conviction of the threatened penalty weighed upon his mind. But, alas, in an evil hour, the penalty was doubted, and lost its influence; and like the sun rushing from his orbit, and filling the universe with dismay and death; so, he, as soon as the force of moral government was broken, rushed from the orbit of his obedience, and filled the world, with crimes, and groans, and desolation.

The Universalists, seem desirous to relieve the world of its anxieties, either by wholly denying or infinitely mitigating the penalty of the law of God. But it is most manifest that could they succeed in producing universal conviction of the truth of their sentiments, they would completely annihilate the power of moral government. Could they convince the world, that God never threatened men with eternal death; that the sufferings of this world are all, or nearly all that sin deserves; that God never designed to punish in a future world; is this sentiment calculated to promote obedience to the law of God? As well might you say, that to take away the penalties of human laws is calculated to secure obedience to their precepts. Is annihilating the motives to obedience, calculated, as a matter of philosophy, to secure obedience? Suppose a statesman should go through the country, maintaining that penalties attached to laws were wholly unnecessary, that it was quite as well or better not to threaten men with evil in case of disobedience. That to exhibit the amiableness of virtue, the mildness and humanity of the government, was all that was required. That the penalty against murder was entirely unnecessary; and that the accusations of his own conscience, and the pains, and trouble, and distresses, that the remembrance of a crime would bring upon its perpetrator, were as much as the crime deserved: that to exhibit other penalties was wholly unnecessary, inexpedient, and unjust. Would he not be regarded as a madman, as a fit subject for bedlam? Would not every man regard his doctrine as dangerous, or, if innocent, only so, because it was incredible and ridiculous? Would he do the world a favor by persuading them to act upon this principle; to strike out the penalties of all their laws? Would he not rather be regarded as the common enemy of man, as aiming to open the flood-gates of iniquity, and inundate the world with crime.

It is a notorious fact that even the penalty of death is not in all cases sufficient to prevent the perpetration of murder; and is it philosophy, is it common sense, is it to be believed, is it possible, that to do away this penalty, or to mitigate its pains, or to substitute a less motive in its place, would be sufficient to prevent the crime? So it is seen to be a naked matter of fact, that the penalty of eternal death, does not, in those cases where it is admitted to be eternal, restrain from sin. This infinite penalty has not sufficient weight and power to counteract the selfishness of the human heart. And now by what mad logic of earth or hell, do these men arrive at the sage conclusion, that to do away this penalty, would have a tendency to promote obedience to God? It is in vain to say, that the excellence and blessedness of the precept, is a sufficient motive to secure obedience; this is not only contrary to fact, but contrary to all philosophy. It is admitted that there is a high and powerful motive, held out in the precept itself; the happiness of virtue is of itself a great inducement to be virtuous; but still this is only one part of the sanction of the law; from the nature of mind it is indispensable, not only that rewards to obedience should be offered, but that evil should be threatened to disobedience; and especially is this most manifest in a universe, where virtue is to be tested by temptation. Is it not certain then, that could they succeed in establishing the doctrine of the old serpent, that the wicked shall not die; they would make the commandment of God of no effect, and introduce universal rebellion and misrule into the empire of Jehovah. If an infinite penalty does not sufficiently restrain the selfishness of the human heart; what delirious babble is it to say, that a finite one would do it. If the threatened pains of eternal death, be not sufficient to stay the overflowings of sin; shall the simple consideration of the pains of this short life, roll back the insurgent waves of rebellion against high heaven, and beget peace on earth, and good will to men? It cannot be.

Will it here be said, that the penalty of eternal death, only appeals to the fears of men; that men cannot be frightened into obedience to God? The truth is, that both fear and hope, are innate in the human mind, and are both implanted there as principles upon which moral government can act. Self-love, or the love of happiness, and dread of misery, differs entirely in its nature from selfishness. To these, to both hope and fear, both law and gospel continually make their appeals.

We have before us a striking illustration of the death blow given by Universalist sentiments to the law of God. Their preaching universal salvation never makes men holier and better; never convinces of sin and promotes revivals of religion; never engages men in prayer, and effort for the enlightening of the world, and the salvation of immortal souls. Whoever knew the law of God, robbed of its penalty as exhibited by the Universalists, to reform a drunkard, rebuke and reclaim a debauchee; to bring the high handed sinner upon his knees, and humble him as a little child. Who has not seen a case of this kind. A member of an orthodox church had been a praying man; attended church, was sober, honest, virtuous, and apparently religious. But by and by, he absented himself from the meetings for prayer, next he fled the sanctuary on the Sabbath; on inquiry, it was found that he neglected prayer in his family; on further search it was found he drank too much; he began to doubt whether there was an eternal hell; and on being excommunicated he became a Universalist.

Now whoever saw the reverse of this? A Universalist, a man of prayer? of sober, prayerful, religious life, who attended Universalist prayer meetings, and tried to promote revivals of religious among them, who kept up family, and closet prayer, to by and by relax in his exertions, grow cold in zeal, neglect their prayer meetings, stay away from the house of God, drink too much, embrace the sentiment of an eternal hell, and on being excommunicated from the Universalists, join the orthodox? I say who ever saw this? not one. There is no tendency in their sentiments to reform mankind. This is plain in philosophy, and abundantly established by facts. They may exhibit their traditions till the day of judgment, and so far from promoting holiness among men, they will only open the flood gates of iniquity.

But 2dly. The GOSPEL has been made of no effect by the traditions of men. This has been done by overlooking its two fold design. It is designed first to establish the law. It lays down the same rule of action, requires the same holiness of heart and life, and aims at restoring men to perfect obedience to the moral law. It does not abrogate or repeal the law, but enforces obedience, by exhibiting not only the original sanctions of the law, but by adding the peculiar, solemn, moving, melting ones of the gospel.

Its second design is, to provide a substitute for the execution of its penalty, to offer pardon on terms that are consistent with the honor of the moral governor, and calculated to promote the stability and influence of his government. To lose sight of either of these designs, is manifestly to render the gospel of no effect.

Some have viewed the gospel, as merely a system of mercy, as offering a pardon for sin, irrespective of its design and tendency to make men holy. They have talked, and preached and prayed about the mercy of God; they have exhibited it as a remedy, without convincing the sinner that he was diseased; have urged him to accept a pardon without convincing him of sin; and thus by overlooking the holiness which the gospel inculcates, and enjoins; exhibiting the pardon of the gospel without requiring its duties, they have made the gospel of no effect. The gospel, thus perverted, has no tendency to save mankind, overlooking its morality, its mercy, and its pardon can never save the souls of men; justification, without sanctification, forgiveness without holiness, is not only absurd, but salvation upon such conditions is impossible. These, to be sure, lay great stress upon the atonement, admit the divinity of Jesus Christ, and exalt a dead faith even above obedience to the law of God. This class of professors may in general be known by their great zeal for what they term sound doctrine, and at the same time a manifest reluctance to hearing the self-denying duties of the gospel forcibly inculcated. The doctrines of God's sovereignty, the perseverance of the saints, and their kindred doctrines, are the only truth which they relish, and only a distorted and perverted view of these can feed them. They lay much more stress on doctrine than on that practice which it is the sole object of doctrine to produce. It is clear that they rest on the shadow and reject the substance. They are only hearers, but not doers of the word, deceiving their own selves, who shall

utterly perish in their own corruption.

There is another tradition over and against this, that professes to recognize the morality of the gospel, but denies, and nullifies its most moving motives to obedience. They preach good works, but deny the power of faith, and the atonement of the son of God. But here, the power of the gospel is as sadly marred as in the other case, professedly admitting its morality, but denying its sanctions, annihilates its power. The most moving motive of the gospel is presented in the doctrine of atonement. Blot out this, and the gospel has no power to save and reclaim, as facts abundantly testify. The fact is, that these parties, are at an equal remove from the truth. The one denies the morality, and the other rejects the leading motives; and thus the power of the blessed gospel is destroyed, and the abettors of both these systems are yet in their sins. That which admits the morality, but rejects the atonement, is a system of self-righteousness. While on the other hand that which admits the atonement, but overlooks the necessity of personal holiness, turns the grace of God into licentiousness.

3dly. Others have nullified and broken the power of the gospel by introducing traditions, having a direct tendency to prevent its being accepted. One of these is, the doctrine of physical depravity. This tradition inculcates that depravity, is constitutional; that it enters into the very substance of the human soul. Something created in them. A natural appetite or craving for sin, like the appetite for food in the body.

Immediately attached to this, growing out of it, and founded upon it, is the tradition of inability on the part of the sinner to accept the gospel. These maintain that the sinner is no more able to embrace the gospel, than he is to make a world. Some of this class call on sinners to repent, but are careful to tell them they cannot repent; call on them to believe, but are sure to remind them that they are unable to believe: and thus as some have humourously and truly said they preach

You can, and you can't.

You shall, and you shan't

You will, and you won't.

You'll be damned if you don't.

Tacked on to this, is the dogma of physical regeneration, another death dealing tradition of the elders. This is a necessary part of the same system, for if the nature itself be depraved; if depravity is constitutional, and something created with the mind itself; then regeneration must be physical. It must remedy the defect in the constitution. It must be the destroying of the constitutional craving for sin, and such an alteration of the powers of moral agency, as, to say the least, will render obedience, and holiness possible. Now it is clear, that no greater obstacles could be presented to the reception of the gospel than are found in these three dogmas just named viz: physical depravity, consequent inability and constitutional regeneration. They all lead inevitably, and logically to the exercise of a spirit of self-justification. A man has no right to blame himself for his depravity if it be constitutional. If it be something created in him, and born with him, the irresistible inference is, that it is something for which he is not to blame. If this notion of depravity be true, he must, and ought to justify himself. To repent of such depravity is impossible. A man might as well be called upon to repent of the color of his skin, of the color of his eyes, or for any of the bodily senses which he possesses. Nor, if his depravity be constitutional, is it any more just, reasonable or possible for him to repent of his actual transgressions. If they are the natural results of a depraved and defective constitution, he is no more to blame for them, than for the effects of any bodily disease, with which he may

be born. Now in what light must the gospel be regarded, that calls upon man to repent of constitutional depravity under pain of eternal death; and to complete the absurdity, and insult, informs him at the same time, that he has no power to repent. To suspend salvation upon impossible conditions; at once insults his understanding and mocks his hopes. Is this the gospel of the blessed God? Impossible! It is a libel upon Almighty God!

But, another inevitable tendency of these traditions is, to lead those who embrace them, to adopt the waiting system. If he is really unable to obey God, of what use are his efforts; while he believes himself unable, he must regard it as of no use to try; efforts are idle, and worse than idle. That he must quietly wait for God to change his heart, is both the logical, and irresistible inference from such premises, and God alone is to blame for his continued impenitence.

Again, Universalism is another logical, and irresistible inference from these dogmas. Assuming as a fact, that men are constitutionally depraved, unable to obey the gospel, under the necessity of waiting for a physical regeneration, one must either adopt the conclusion that God is an infinite tyrant, or that all will be saved.

Again, these traditions have a manifest tendency to conduct a thinking mind into the regions of infidelity. What! exclaims a man of thought, am I to believe that a book containing such absurdities as these, is from God. That God has made men sinners; incapable of serving him, suspended their salvation upon impossible conditions, made it indispensable that they should have a physical regeneration, and then damns them for being sinners, and for not complying with these impossible conditions, monstrous! blasphemous! Believe this who can! Thus having neither inclination, or perhaps time, for examining the Bible for himself, and hearing incessant changes rung upon these dogmas he becomes disgusted, and very naturally concludes that if these are the doctrines of the Bible, its religion is but a dream.

Once more. These dogmas, are calculated to beget and often have produced the most high handed and dreadful rebellion against Almighty God. Sinners, supposing these to be true, and supposing that God would damn them if they did not repent, and yet were unable to repent; that He had made them sinners; that their very nature was itself depraved, and for this depravity, they were exposed to, and threatened with eternal death: they have been led in many instances to curse him to his face. And what is wonderful, this very natural, and I must say, reasonable opposition, upon the assumption that these sentiments are true, has been dwelt upon by their abettors, as evidence of their truth.

Another, and the last tradition to which I shall call your attention at the present time, is what is generally called irresistible grace. This doctrine maintains that sinners are irresistibly converted; that if they are of the number of the elect, they will be converted in spite of themselves. By irresistible grace I understand and mean nothing more than that it is not, in those cases, resisted. But it has been maintained by some that it was properly irresistible. This is evidently a limb of physical regeneration.

If that is true, this must be true also. But what is more calculated to quiet a man in his sins, than the idea of irresistible grace in regeneration. That do what he will; live as he will; resist as he will; still if he is to be converted, he will be irresistibly wrought upon, converted, and saved in spite of himself. I cannot conceive of a sentiment more directly calculated to break the power of the gospel, to strengthen the sinner's hands in his rebellion, and settle him quietly down upon his lees until he sinks to the depths of hell.

It is believed that in millions of instances the traditions of physical or constitutional depravity, and inability, with their kindred errors, have led men very consistently to justify themselves, and condemn God. Hence

when they have been called upon to repent, and believe the gospel, they have replied that they were willing and waiting God's time. The inference from their premises was irresistible, that they must wait, and consequently a compromise ensued; instead of calling upon him, and insisting upon his immediate repentance; instead of urging him to make to him a new heart and a new spirit, on pain of eternal death, he has been told to pray, to use the means, to call upon God for the influences of his spirit and wait for sovereign grace to change his heart.

Thus when the sinner has felt straitened, and shut up to the faith, and ready to break down under the pressure of the requirement to repent and believe the gospel; his conscience has been relieved; the pressure of obligation mitigated, and the agonizing obligation to instant submission deferred. The sinner has found his pains removed, his obligation to present duty postponed; he has turned away, in the use of means, quenched the Spirit, prayed himself to sleep, and sunk to the depths of hell.

And no wonder; for the requirements of God, are set aside, and another rule of duty substituted in its place. The requirement of the gospel is, repent now, and believe that your soul may live. It gives not the sinner a moment's time to wait; it presses upon him with all the weight of Jehovah's authority, instantly to ground his weapons, and submit to God. He feels hedged in, as with a wall of fire; he pants, and struggles, and is driven to extremity; he prays, but still the gospel cries repent and believe; he goes to church, and reads his Bible, and attends upon the means; but his conscience finds no relief, the commandment comes thundering upon his ear repent and believe the gospel.

Whatever he does, or omits to do. Wherever he goes; the requirement still follows him, and increases his distress. But here comes in the charming, soothing opiate of inability. He meets some one, who tells him to use the means; that God is a sovereign, that he cannot repent himself; that he must not think to take the work out of the hands of God; that if he prays, and waits, at the gospel pool, he has no reason to be discouraged; that by and by, he has every reason to hope that God will change his heart.

Ah, says the sinner; is it so. I feel relieved. I felt as if ten thousand voices were crying in my ears, repent, repent? And the more I prayed and used the means, the more guilty I felt: for I supposed that God required nothing less than absolute, and unconditional, and instantaneous submission. But I thank you for your comforting conversation. If this is all, to pray, and use the means, and wait God's time, I can do it without distraction. Thus another requirement being substituted for that of God, the power of the gospel is broken; and the commandment that was about to crush the sinner in the dust, that had hedged him in, and gave him no gleam of hope, but in instant submission[,] is rendered of no effect by this tradition. The sinner breathes easier, feels relieved from the pressure of present obligation, drinks the lethean draught of the soul killing poison, and goes down to hell.

If he believes himself in the performance of duty when in the use of means; the more industriously he uses the means, the less real conviction of sin he will have; if he supposes this is what is required of him; of course, while he is thus performing what he supposes to be duty, he must suppose himself to be growing better. The more he multiplies his impenitent prayers, and tears, and efforts; the more acceptable he must suppose himself to be to God. Thus his fears gradually subside; his good opinion of himself increases; his delusions deepen; and "while his judgment of a long time lingereth not, and his damnation slumbereth not;" he is gradually, but surely sinking into the slumbers of a stifled conscience; of a hardened heart; and about to cry peace and safety, until sudden destruction come upon him that he cannot escape.

INFERENCES AND REMARKS.

1. You see, from this subject, why some deny total depravity. The principal reasons are two. The first, is founded on inattention to the spirituality of God's law, confining their attention to the prohibitory applications of it, as contained in the ten commandments, and considering it as designed merely to restrain outbreking sins; overlooking the absolute, positive perfection that it enjoins, in thought, word, and deed, they in reality substitute another rule of conduct, in the place of the law of God. Thus comparing themselves with a false standard, they of course mistake their own character. Instead of closely weighing their thoughts, their affection, and all the movements of their minds, in the delicate scales of the sanctuary: instead of bringing all their heart and all their soul under the clear blaze of the law of God; they weigh themselves in the corrupt scale of their own imaginings, and sink down to death.

2. Another reason why men deny total depravity, is, that they cannot see how the constitutional powers of the mind should be in themselves sinful; nor how it is that a God of justice could make men with a nature in itself totally depraved. Nor can I. If this be what is meant by depravity, I not only deny total depravity, but in this view of it, all depravity.

3. You see, why, some see no need of an atonement, for sin. They have entirely misunderstood the nature of God's law. This was the reason why the Scribes and Pharisees, seemed to have had no right notion of the necessity of an atonement. Their system was mere self-righteousness. They, therefore, esteemed the announcement of the Deity of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of his atonement, as blasphemous.

4. You see from this subject why the doctrines of grace as they are called, lead to a pure morality. Some have regarded the doctrine of the vicarious sufferings of Jesus Christ, his making an atonement for sin, and making the conditions of salvation to be faith and repentance, as a dangerous doctrine, calculated to encourage men in iniquity by holding out to them the hope of heaven, though they may continue to the last hour of their lives in rebellion against God. Thus, they look upon the doctrines of grace, as calculated to overthrow the very foundations of morality, and as highly prejudicial to the well being of society. But the fact is, as all experience shows, that those who most cordially embrace the doctrines of grace, exhibit the purest morality. The reason is, they have right views of the spirituality of God's law; and notwithstanding they understand the conditions of the gospel to be repentance and faith; still they regard God's law, in all the length and breadth of its spirituality, as the rule of their lives. Upon this they keep their eye, as upon a pure mirror; in this they see their exact moral image; this leads them to watchfulness, to prayer, and to walking with God. And while the purity of its precepts annihilates every hope of being saved by their own works; they see and feel, that until they are perfectly conformed to the full length and breadth of its requirements, they never can be perfectly happy.

5. You see why those who reject the doctrine of the atonement, and depend upon their own works, and the general mercy of God for salvation, exhibit a spurious, and lax morality. The fact is, it is their loose and vague notions of the spirituality of God's law, which lies at the foundation of their rejecting the doctrine of atonement: and as their views of the rule of duty is defective; their morality will be in like manner defective.

6. You see from this subject, why it is that some professors of religion, when they are pressed up to holy living, their sins pointed out, and they are required to obey the law of God; cry out, this is not the gospel; this is preaching the law; tell us of the mercy of God; we want to hear about Christ, not about the law. The fact is, such persons are Antinomians. They regard the gospel simply as a system of pardon, and overlook the great design of its making them holy, and bringing them back to perfect obedience of the law of God.

7. From what has been said, we may understand, why it is, that for so many hundred years, the gospel has had so little influence over the minds of men. For many centuries, but little of the real gospel has been preached, that is, it has been so mixed with the traditions of men, so much that is human, so much that is false, has been added to it, and intermingled with it, as to break its power. All the multitudinous errors, and false notions that have clustered around the doctrine of physical depravity, have every one of them served to shield the sinner from the arrows of the Almighty. Physical depravity, physical regeneration, the sinner's inability, and all their kindred errors, have formed so many hiding places, under which, millions upon millions have been entrenched, until the hail has swept away their refuges of lies, and the waters of Almighty wrath have over flowed their hiding places: and it is not to be doubted, that thousands of millions of our race are now groaning in hell, that might have been saved, but for these traditions of the elders that have made void the commandment of God. The design, and the tendency of the gospel, is, to bring men to immediate repentance. It lays upon them no requirement short of this. It never calls upon them to do any thing less than to repent, and obey the gospel. But men, holding, as many of them have, that sinners were unable to do this, have set them to do something else, which God never required at their hands, as a condition of salvation; and in doing which, they put off repentance, sinned away their day of grace, and lost their souls. I have already observed that the gospel was early corrupted. These corruptions have continued in a greater or less degree, to mingle themselves with the pure gospel; and precisely in proportion as more or less error has been mingled with the truth, the gospel has been more or less successful. Its power depends on its purity.

8. Multitudes have preached the substance of the gospel, but the misfortune is, they have added to it something of their own. They have preached, and boldly called on men to repent, but before they left the pulpit, would be sure to admonish them that they had no power to obey. Suppose the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, when the alarmed Jews cried out, sirs, what shall we do to be saved; instead of saying, "repent every one of you," had said, you can't repent, you are dependant upon the Spirit of God; you must pray, and use the means, and wait God's time. If the multitude had believed them, it is manifest that not one of them had been converted on the spot.

9. Again the day of earth's redemption can never come, till the traditions of the elders are done away; till all those dogmas that afford hiding places for the enemies of God, are rejected as making no part of the gospel of Christ. When ministers of all denominations shall see eye to eye, shall disencumber the glorious gospel of all these traditions of men's devising; shall take the pure commandment of God, and bring it with an uncompromising spirit to bear with mountain weight upon the rebellious hearts of dying men; when they call on them instantly to repent, and treat them as if they expected them to repent; when they live, and labor, and pray, and preach, and exhibit the true gospel in all they say and do; then, and not till then, will the full power of God's moral government be felt on earth.

10. These traditions of the elders are the grand sources of most of the fatal errors of the present day. Universalism, as I have before remarked, has evidently had its origin in the notion of inability, and physical depravity. They have reasoned thus:--If men came into being with a depraved nature, physically and naturally inclined to all evil; if they are unable to obey God, as they really must be, if such is their nature; then surely a God of justice cannot damn them. Now this inference is irresistible from their premises. For God to make men physically incapable of obedience, and then damn them for disobedience, would be infinite tyranny and injustice. From the benevolence, and even upon the ground of the justice of God, upon the principles of physical depravity and inability, the arguments for Universalism is irresistible. Upon this hypothesis, they are right in rejecting, as most modern Universalists do, mercy from their system, and

placing the salvation of men upon the ground of justice.

But take away the foundation, and the superstructure falls of course. Annihilate the dogma of physical depravity and inability; show the sinner that his depravity is a thing of his own creation; that his wicked heart is his voluntary selfishness, and the rejection of God and his commandments; that it is not for his nature, but for his conduct, that he is blamed; show him that what he calls his cannot, is his will not, and you destroy the very foundation upon which his universalism is built, you convince him of his sin, and shut him up to the faith of Christ.

11. Again, as I have before said from this subject, in the doctrine of physical depravity, and its kindred dogmas, you see the foundation of modern infidelity. Thinking men, hearing those doctrines, so often reiterated from the pulpit, become disgusted, when they hear men called upon to repent, and at the same time told that they cannot repent; when they hear the doctrine of the new birth, darkened by words without knowledge, when every thing is covered with mystery; the depravity of nature, the infusion of a new holy taste or principle; the mysterious and mystical nature of sin and holiness, of depravity and of regeneration; this confounding of mind and matter, of body and soul, of heaven, and earth, and hell; they look upon it as unphilosophical, ridiculous, absurd, and impossible; they turn away from such a loathsome exhibition of it, as something impossible for them to understand, and conclude that it is all a dream.

12. It is easy to see why revivals do not, and cannot prevail more extensively than they do. There is such a sticklishness on the part of many, for these crippling errors; such a constant effort to maintain these traditions of the elders, as to paralyze the influence of a great portion of the church. Many good men are halting and doubting whether they should reject them or not; and they are in that state of "betweenity," that they can heartily exhibit neither one thing nor the other.

Many come out boldly, and strenuously, and hold up those dogmas, and while these are the topics continually held before the mind, it cannot be expected that revivals should prevail. It is true, that men have had great and powerful revivals who have held and sometimes exhibited these views; but it was not when they exhibited them, that their preaching took effect. But when happily they were inconsistent enough to lay aside these peculiarities, and come out with the pressure of the gospel upon the hearts and consciences of men.

Take a parable. A lady who had been a long time under conviction, had often called on her minister, to know what she should do to be saved. He had as often reminded her of her helplessness, and dependance upon God; exhorted her to pray, and use the means, and wait patiently for God to change her heart. On the Sabbath, he would frequently call upon sinners to repent; but before he closed would be sure to caution them against self-confidence, depending upon their own strength; and would solemnly remind them that they had no power of themselves to repent and embrace the gospel.

But one day, when this agonized woman was present, he happily forgot his accustomed inconsistency, and after pressing sinners to immediate repentance, sat down without the usual addition that they could not. Before the last hymn had concluded, the gospel had done its work in the woman's heart; and after the congregation was dismissed, she was observed to stand weeping and waiting as he passed out to speak with him. As soon as he came near enough she exclaimed, my dear Mr. ----- why did you not tell me of this before?

Tell you of this before, replied the astonished pastor, why I have declared it to you every Sabbath. Yes, she replied, but always until now, you told me before you set down, that I could not repent. I hope said the

pastor you have not gone on in your own strength; no, she replied, not in my own, but in the strength of God I have repented, and should have done it before had you not told me that I could not. This is the legitimate tendency of cannotism; if they believe it, they certainly will not repent; and how can revivals prevail, how can the world be converted, while so many are vehemently contending for these traditions of the elders.

These dogmas, are exalted into fundamental doctrines, and they are supposed to be heretics, who do not keep these traditions. Well might Christ turn upon them with the rebuke, "wherefore do ye make void the commandment of God by your traditions." Oh! when will the day arrive, when the spurious philosophy upon which these dogmas are based, shall be given up? When unanimity of sentiment, and clearness of views, and brotherly love shall prevail? then will righteousness run down our streets, and salvation as an overflowing stream.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/traditions-of-the-elders/>

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