

True and False Religion

by Charles Finney

True religion is chosen for its own sake, while false religion is submitted to as the least of two evils.

Scripture: Psalm 119:45, Matthew 11:28-30, John 8:36, Romans 6:18, Romans 8:1-2, 2 Corinthians 3:17, Galatians 5:1, Philippians 4:4, James 1:25, 1 John 5:3

Topics: "True Liberty in Christ", "The Danger of Legalism"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the distinction between true and false religion, emphasizing that many people practice a form of religion that is merely a yoke of bondage rather than a source of genuine liberty. He explains that true liberty is found in a relationship with Christ, characterized by love and joy, rather than legalistic observance. Finney warns against the Judaizers who sought to combine legalism with Christianity, asserting that true faith is based solely on justification by faith. He encourages believers to examine their hearts and ensure that their faith is not a burdensome obligation but a joyful expression of love for God. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the freedom that comes from Christ, urging listeners to reject the chains of false religion.

Transcript

Text.--Gal. 5:1: "Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

The observances of the ceremonial law were designedly a typical representation of the gospel. The Jews had misunderstood them, and supposed that their observance was the ground of justification and acceptance with God. After the introduction of Christianity, many of the Christian Jews were exceedingly zealous for their observance, and for uniting the ceremonial dispensation with Christianity. On the contrary, Paul, "the great Apostle of the Gentiles," insisted upon justification by faith alone, entirely irrespective of any legal observances and conditions whatever. There were a set of teachers in the early days of Christianity who were called Judaizers, from the fact, that they insisted upon uniting legal observances with Christianity, as a ground of justification. Soon after the establishment of the Galatian Churches, by St. Paul, these Judaizers succeeded in introducing this corruption into the Christian Churches. To rebuke this error, and overthrow it, was the design of this epistle. The yoke and bondage spoken of in the text, was the yoke of legal observances. The liberty here mentioned is the liberty of love--of justification--and of sanctification, by faith alone.

In discussing this subject, I design to show,

I. WHAT IT IS TO MAKE A MAN A SLAVE.

II. WHAT IT IS TO BE A SLAVE.

III. WHAT TRUE LIBERTY IS.

IV. THAT THE RELIGION OF MANY PERSONS IS MERE SLAVERY.

V. THAT TRUE RELIGION IS GENUINE LIBERTY.

I. I am to show what it is to make a man a SLAVE.

To enslave a man is to treat a person as a thing--to set aside moral agency; and to treat a moral agent as a mere piece of property.

II. I am to show, what it is to be a SLAVE.

It is not to be in a state of involuntary servitude, for, strictly speaking, such a state is impossible. The slaves in the Southern States are not, strictly speaking, in a state of involuntary servitude. Upon the whole, they choose to serve their masters, rather than do worse. A man cannot act against his will, but his will may be influenced by considerations that set aside his liberty. To be a slave, is to be under the necessity of choosing between two evils. Thus the slaves in the Southern States prefer being as they are, to being in a worse condition--to being imprisoned or whipped for attempting to escape. But plainly, this is a choice between two evils, neither of which, if left to themselves would they choose. So a wicked man may choose to obey human laws, rather than suffer the consequences of disobedience; still he may abhor the laws, and feel himself shut up to the necessity of choosing between two evils. So a wife who does not love her husband, may choose, upon the whole, to live with him, rather than break up her family--lose her character--and subject herself to poverty and reproach. And yet, if she does not love her husband, she will consider living with him, merely as the least of two calamities. She feels shut up to the necessity of choosing between two courses, neither of which is agreeable to her. All that can be said, is that she chooses that course which, upon the whole, is the least disagreeable.

To be obliged to choose against our feelings and inclinations--to be shut up to the necessity of pursuing a course of life not chosen for its own sake, but as the [l]east of two evils--is the very essence of slavery.

III. I am to show what true liberty is.

1. True liberty does not consist in the unrestrained indulgence of lust and selfishness.

2. Nor in freedom from all law, or rule of action.

3. But true liberty consists in the privilege of choosing and pursuing that course of life in which our whole moral being will harmonize--where violence is done to no law of the mind.

4. In other words, and more particularly, it consists in pursuing that course which is preferred for its own sake--that course of life which is not chosen as the least of two evils; but of all possible courses, is that which the mind prefers; e.g. a wife who loves her husband, and prefers his society to that of any other man, is free, in the proper sense of the term, in living with him; whereas, if she preferred another man to him, and lived with her own husband, from other considerations than love, she would be a slave, and not free.

A man who obeys wholesome laws, from love to virtue and good order, is free in the highest sense; but when he obeys law from restraint, not because he loves virtue, but from fear of punishment, he is a slave. Here it is plain that his choice of obedience is, by him, considered as a choice of two evils, and not that course of conduct which he prefers for its own sake.

IV. The Religion of many persons is mere Slavery.

1. Their religion is not that in which they are most deeply interested. Their conduct shows that many other things interest them more deeply than the subject of religion--upon which they are more excited and engaged. Their religion seems to be like the labor of children. Children choose to play for its own sake--in that they are deeply interested. Therein you see their engagedness and zeal. But when put at work, it is manifest that this is submitted to as the least of two evils. They don't love work for its own sake, but prefer it to punishment. Just so it seems to be with the religion of many professors. Religion is not that to which they naturally turn as the great central object of their affections, and to which they return with the force of gravity, as soon as the pressure of any object that has diverted their attention for a time, is removed. On the contrary, their attention is somewhere else, even while they are outwardly, and languidly attending to what they call religion.

2. Their religion is altogether a secondary business. It is not the great, absorbing, commanding, prominent object of their lives; but is so far huddled into a corner, that everyone may see that religion is not their main business, that they have some other business, and that religion is a matter by the bye.

Thus, what they call their religious duties--their prayers--reading the scriptures, &c. are hurried over, or for slight causes wholly omitted. While that which constitutes their main business, commands their time, and thoughts, and hearts.

3. Religion, with them, is a matter rather of conscience, than of the heart. They feel themselves driven by the remonstrances of conscience, to the performance of their religious duties, rather than drawn by the deep love of religion itself.

4. That their religion is slavery is evident from the fact that it does not constitute their happiness. This demonstrates that it is not a thing chosen for its own sake. True, they cannot be happy without it, nor can they be happy with it. Conscience will not suffer them to rest without something they can call religion. And yet they do not choose it for its own sake. The mind is not satisfied with it, nor is it made happy by it.

5. They are religious upon the same principle that men take medicine in time of sickness. It is submitted to for the benefits of it. The medicine may be nauseous and offensive in itself, but is submitted to as the least of two evils.

6. Just so religion is by many submitted to as something [sic.] they must attend to. Not that it is loved for its own sake. Nor that the mind chooses it as that course which, on every account, is most desired and valued by the mind; but as something that it will not do to neglect.

7. Religion is regarded by this class of persons as the most important, yet not the most loved employment. Their reason affirms that it is the one thing needful. But their hearts do not affirm that it is the one thing most loved, and rejoiced in for its own sake.

8. The real state of mind in which this class of persons are, may be learned from the fact, that in exhorting others to attend to the subject of religion, they rather dwell on the danger of neglect, than on the

blessedness of the thing itself.

9. And that this does not arise merely out of the fact that they expect such considerations to be most influential with those to whom they speak--you will observe that in speaking about or considering their own case, they are influenced mainly by the same reason they press upon others. Religion is, with them, some thing that it will not do to neglect. The hazard of neglect--the stings of conscience, and the misery that neglect brings with it, are the things which most influence them.

10. They are under circumstances of constraint. They must serve God--they must attend to their duty--they must prepare for death.

11. Their enjoyment consists mostly in their hope, and not in the exercise of religion itself. Did they never expect to be more happy in their religion than they are now, they would be "of all men the most miserable." Hence they drag out their religion, in obedience to the dictates of conscience, knowing that it does not constitute their happiness here--but somehow they hope it will be more agreeable to them in heaven.

12. Their religion acts by way of re-strait and con-straint. It serves as a bridle to rein in, and restrain their rampant, sinful propensities, on the one hand, and a whip to urge them forward in their religious duties, on the other. It is not that course of life which of all possible, or conceivable courses, is the most agreeable to them for its own sake. But they have an existence, and there is no alternative. They must be religious, or they must be damned. They must continually be thrown upon the terrors of their conscience, or drag on in duty, however much their heart may reluctant.

13. Consequently, you hear them calculating about how much is their part, in any religious or benevolent enterprise; and they seem to be glad when they think they have done what they suppose falls to their share. Then they think they have done up their duty, and may rest awhile, or attend to their own affairs. --Hence,

14. The inquiry, how little they can get along with doing, and giving, and praying, and still maintain a hope? How little religion is compatible with going to heaven?

In short, it is plain that their religion, instead of being their happiness, as something chosen for its own sake, and pursued on its own account, is their misery, as the least of two evils. Instead of making them happy, enough of it would be hell.

V. I am to show, that true religion is genuine liberty.

1. Because it is that which is chosen for its own sake--that course which the mind prefers to all other conceivable courses of life.

2. It is the highest good, in the estimation of the mind that possesses it.

3. If left entirely unbiassed [sic.] by every other consideration, and having all other possible and conceivable courses of life, and conduct spread out before it, the religion of Christ would be its supreme, eternal choice.

4. It is that in which the whole being, in all its powers, unites and harmonizes. The reason--the conscience--the understanding--all the affections and emotions--in short, the volitions, and all that makes up the moral being, unite and sweetly harmonize, in the exercise of this divine religion.

5. Consequently it constitutes real, permanent happiness.

6. It casts out fear--fear of hell--fear of disgrace--fear of man--and all fear that hath torment, is annihilated, and the mind sweetly bathes itself in an ocean of love and peace.

7. The soul yields obedience to all the requirements of God joyfully. For the will of God marks out to it the very course, of all others, which it delights to pursue. The affectionate wife obeys her husband, and his wish is her law, not of constraint but willingly, because her happiness is wrapped up in doing his will. She loves him, and to please him is her element and her life. Just so it is with the true Christian. To please God is his supreme joy.

8. The true Christian never yields to the will of God by constraint; but always prefers the will of God, whenever that will is known. In other words he really wills what God wills, as soon, and as far as he knows what that is. He may have desires for this and the other object, and may express those desires to God in prayer. He may think this, or that course would be most for the glory of God. But true religion always prefers that God's will should be done. His will is controlled by infinite wisdom and love. It is impossible, therefore, that true religion should ever be made miserable, by being obliged, or constrained to submit to the will of God.

9. True religion is not submitted to, by him that possesses it, as medicine, but is like food, that we eat for its own sake. We love our food, and should eat it for the pleasure of eating, whether we expect to be benefited by it or not. Just so in religion.--The mind is not mainly influenced by the benefit to be received; but it is the food of the mind--the natural aliment on which it lives.

10. The truly religious man does not inquire how little religion he can get along with; but how much he may possess.

11. Not how much sin may be indulged in, and yet he get to heaven; but how he can be rid of all sin, whether he goes to heaven or not. Not how sinful he may be, and still be a child of God; but how holy he may and can be.

12. His religion makes up his happiness. It is the continual exercise of it that mainly makes him blest, and enough of the same kind would make heaven.

REMARKS.

1. From what has been said, it is manifest, that many professors of religion, in reality, regard God as a great slaveholder. I do not mean that they would say this in words. Nor that they understand that they do regard him in this light. The reason is, that they do not understand themselves to be slaves. If they realized what slavery is, and that they themselves have the spirit of slaves, and are, in their religion, all that is meant by being slaves, they would then be shocked with the irresistible inference that they do regard God as a Slaveholder.

2. What an abomination such a religion must be in the sight of God. Instead of seeing his professed children engaged, heart and soul, in his service--finding it the essence of true liberty, and their supreme joy--he beholds them groaning under it, as a severe burden, submitted to only to escape his frown.

3. You see, in this discourse, the true distinction between the religion of law, and that of the gospel. The religion of many professors seems to set as painfully on them, as a straitjacket. It is evidently not their

natural element. It is the bondage of law, and not the religion of peace.

4. Many express indignation against Southern slavery, as they may well do, but who are slaves themselves. They know full well, that if they would be honest with themselves, their religion is to them a yoke of bondage. They are afraid of death--afraid of the judgment--afraid of God.

They submit to religion as the only method of escaping "the wrath to come." But yet, let it be known to them, that there is no hell--no solemn judgment--the [that] men will universally be saved, do what they will, and they will feel relieved of a weighty burden. They will feel rid of the responsibilities of moral agents, and cast off their religion as of no consequence.

5. This slavery is utterly inexcusable, and consists in the perverse state of the heart.

6. Such religion is worse than no religion.

(1) It is not any more safe, than no religion.

(2) It is more hypocritical than none.

(3) It confirms self-righteousness.

(4) It begets, and perpetuates a delusion in the mind.

(5) It ruins the soul of the professor, and is a stumbling block to others. What is a greater stumbling block, for example, than for an impenitent husband to see his wife possessing this painful, legal religion? Instead of observing her happy, humble, sweet, heavenly minded, and peaceful, like an angel, he perceives that her religion makes her complaining, uneasy, and irritable; in short, that it is the lashings of conscience, by which she is actuated, and not the constant flow, of the deep feelings of her heart.

(6) This kind of religion is more dishonorable to God than none. It is really the contrast of true religion. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, against which there is no law." Now the religion of which I have been speaking, is the very opposite of all this. To be sure, a man who is openly irreligious, dishonors God. But a man who professes to be God's representative--to exhibit God's spirit--and to be the reflection of his image; and then go about the duties of religion, as a task to be submitted to, instead of pouring out the overflowings of his benevolence--to unclench his hard hand, at the stern biddings of conscience--is to publish as gross a libel upon the character of God, and the religion of the gospel, as is possible.

(7) It is worse than none, inasmuch as it prevents conviction, and true conversion. Persons in this state suppose themselves to be truly religious, and seem not to dream that this is the very opposite of true religion.

Now, while under this delusion, it is vain to expect their eyes to be opened, and to anticipate a real and thorough conversion to God.

7. All who have left their first love, are again entangled in the yoke of bondage. If any of you have known what it was to love God with all your heart, you have known what it was to be free. You know, by your own consciousness, that your religion was then the essence of true liberty. But if you have laid aside your love, no matter by what other principles you are actuated, you are "entangled again in the yoke of bondage." Your religion has ceased to be liberty, and you have become a slave.--Now I ask you, "Where is the

blessedness" you once spoke of? Have you that great peace that they possess who love the law of God? Does the peace of God rule in your hearts? Is Christ's joy fulfilled in you? Or are you lashed along by your conscience, actuated by hope and fear, and any, and every other principle than love?

And now, beloved, I ask you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, whether you have the religion of the gospel. I have, in this discourse, endeavored to set before you, in as simple a form as is possible, the grand distinction between true saints and hypocrites. To which of these classes do you belong? Remember the eye of God is upon you. "Be ye not deceived, for God is not mocked." "If the Son hath made you free, then are ye free indeed." And I exhort you in the words of the text, "Stand fast therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." But, on the other hand, if the Holy Ghost sees you with the chains of slavery upon your soul, driven on by conscience, as by a slave-holder, working out your painful religion, lest you should lose your soul, I beseech you, in the name of Christ, get up out of this bondage--lay aside these chains--"loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion,"--lay aside this legal yoke, and come forth from slavery, and death, that Christ may give you liberty and life.

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