

True Submission: A Matter of Choice

by Charles Finney

True submission to God requires a willingness to obey His will, submit to His moral law, and put His interests above one's own, and is the key to true Christianity and salvation.

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 16:25, Mark 10:29-30, Luke 10:27, Romans 7:19, Romans 8:3-4, 1 Corinthians 10:31, 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, James 4:7

Topics: "True Submission", "Disinterested Love"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that true submission to God is a conscious choice that requires the relinquishing of selfish motives and a genuine love for God and others. He warns against false hopes rooted in selfishness, asserting that true submission involves a complete acquiescence to God's will and a commitment to prioritize His glory over personal interests. Finney clarifies that submission does not mean being willing to sin for God's glory, but rather entails a heartfelt obedience to His moral law and a desire for the good of others. He illustrates that true happiness is found not in pursuing one's own interests but in seeking the glory of God, and he concludes that the gospel calls for a disinterested love that transcends selfish desires.

Transcript

"Submit yourselves therefore to God"--James 4:7

If you have built your Christian life on a false foundation, your fundamental error was embracing what your thought was the gospel plan of salvation from selfish motives. Your selfish heart was unbroken. This is the source of your delusion, if you are deceived. If your selfishness was subdued, you are not deceived in your hope. If it was not, all your religion is in vain, and your hope is vain.

If any of you have a false hope, you are in danger of reviving your old ways. Often false converts, after a season of anxiety and self-examination, settle down again on the old foundation. Their habits of mind have become fixed, and it is difficult to break into a new course. It is indispensable, therefore, if you ever intend to get right, that you see clearly that you have up to now been wrong.

True submission to God is not indifference. No two things can be more opposite than indifference and true submission.

Some suppose that true submission includes the idea of being willing to be sinful for the glory of God. But this is a mistake. To be willing to be sinful is itself a sinful state of mind. And to be willing to do anything for the glory of God is to choose not to be sinful. The idea of being sinful for the glory of God is absurd.

BOWING BEFORE GOD'S WILL

If we were now in hell, true submission would require that we would be willing to be punished. Then it would be certain that it was God's will. If we were in a world where no provision was made for the redemption of sinners and where our punishment was therefore inevitable, it would be our duty to be willing to be punished. But as it is, genuine submission does not imply a willingness to be punished. It is not the will of God that all be punished, but His will is that all who truly repent and submit will be saved.

True submission consists in perfect acquiescence in all the dealings of God, whether relating to ourselves, to others, or to the universe. Some people think they submit to the providential government of God. But they find fault with God's arrangements in many things. They wonder why God permitted Adam to sin or why He permitted sin to enter the universe at all? Or why He did this or that? Or why He made this, that, thus, or so? In all these cases, supposing we could find no reason at all that would be satisfactory, true submission implies a perfect acquiescence in whatever He has permitted or done.

True submission implies yielding to the precepts of God's moral law. The general precept of God's moral law is "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself" (Luke 10:27). Here we must carefully make the distinction between a formal obedience to God's law and actual submission to it.

Common sense approves of this law. Every devil in hell approves of it. God has made our minds so that it is impossible to be a moral agent and not approve His law. But this is not the yielding I propose.

True acquiescence to God's moral law includes actual obedience. It is vain for a child to pretend to yield to his father's commands unless he actually obeys them and vain for a citizen to pretend to agree with the laws of the land unless he obeys them. Men have taken their supreme affection from God and His Kingdom and given it to self-interest. Instead of pressing to do good, as God requires, they have adopted the maxim that "charity begins at home." This is the very point in debate between God and the sinner. The sinner aims at promoting his own interest as his supreme object.

The first idea implied in submission is the yielding of this point. We must stop putting our own interest first and let the interests of God and His Kingdom rise in our affections. We must put them as high above our own interests as their real value is greater. The man who does not do this is a rebel against God.

Suppose a civil ruler wanted to promote the general happiness of his nation and wisely made laws to this end. He would require every subject to do the same. Then suppose an individual set up his own private interest in opposition to the general interest. He is a rebel against the government and against all the interest that the government promotes. Then the first idea of submission, on the part of the rebel, is giving up that point and falling in with the ruler and the obedient subjects in promoting the public good.

The law of God absolutely requires that you make your own happiness subordinate to the glory of God and the good of the universe. Until you do this, you are the enemy of God and the universe.

The gospel requires the same as the law. Many maintain that it is right for a man to aim directly at his own salvation and make his own happiness his goal. But God's law requires everyone to prize God's interest

supremely. Otherwise, Jesus Christ is the minister of sin and came into the world to take up arms against God's government.

From the Bible, we see that the gospel requires love to God and man, the same as the law. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). What does that mean? Men have quoted this very text to prove that it is right to seek our own salvation first and to make that the leading object of pursuit. But that is not the meaning. It requires everyone to make the promotion of the Kingdom of God his great object. It means to aim at being holy.

Happiness is connected with holiness but is not the same thing, and to honor and glorify the Lord is a very different thing from seeking our own interests first.

"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Indeed! May we eat and drink to please ourselves? No! We may not even gratify our natural appetite for food, except in submission to the glory of God. This is what the gospel requires, for the apostle wrote this to the Church.

Our Savior says, "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). If a man aims at his own interest, he will lose his own interest. If saving his own soul is his supreme object, he will lose it. He must make the good of others his supreme object, or he will be lost.

"There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30).

Here some people may stumble and say, "There is a reward held out as a motive." But what are we to do? Forsake self for the sake of a reward to self? No, we must forsake self for the sake of Christ and His gospel, and the consequences will be as stated. This is the important distinction.

TRUE SUBMISSION IS LOVE

In Corinthians 13, Paul gives a full description of disinterested love, or charity, without which a person is nothing. Note how much a person may do and still be nothing: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

True gospel benevolence is of this character: "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Love has no selfish end but seeks the happiness of others as its great end. Without this kind of benevolence, we know there is not a particle of true Christianity.

Many people wonder why the threatening of the Word of God are given, if it is selfishness to be influenced by fear. Man dreads pain. The Scripture threatening answer many purposes. One is to arrest the selfish mind and lead it to examine reasons to love and obey God. When the Holy Spirit gets the attention, then He rouses the sinner's conscience and challenges him to consider and decide on the reasonableness and duty of submitting to God.

Is it wrong to be influenced by pleasure and pain? No, it is neither right nor wrong. These susceptibilities have no moral character. Suppose you stand on a cliff: if you throw yourself down, you will break your neck. You are warned against it. Now, if you do not regard the warning but throw yourself down and destroy your life, that will be sin. But heeding the warning is no virtue. It is simply a prudential act. There is no virtue in avoiding danger, although it may often be sinful not to avoid it. To resist the wrath of God is sinful. But to be afraid of hell is not holy, no more than the fear of breaking your neck is holy.

We may seek our own happiness with respect to its real value, and we are to do so. He that doesn't do this commits sin.

But no one can be happy while he makes his own happiness his supreme object. Happiness consists in the gratification of virtuous desires. But to be gratified, the thing must be obtained that is desired. To be happy, therefore, the desires that are gratified must be right, and they must be disinterested desires

Two things are indispensable to true happiness. First, there must be virtuous or righteous desire. If the desire is not virtuous, conscience will oppose it, and gratification will be attended with pain. Secondly, the object must be desired for its own sake, or the gratification will not be complete, even if it is attained.

If the object is desired as a means to an end, the gratification will depend on obtaining the end by this means. But if the thing was desire as an end, obtaining it would produce true gratification. The mind must not desire its own happiness, for in this way it can never be attained. Desires must strive for some other object that is desired for its own sake, and its attainment would result in happiness.

If everyone pursues his own happiness as the ultimate goal, the interests of different individuals will clash and destroy the happiness of all. This is what we see in the world. It is the reason for all the fraud, violence, oppression, and wickedness in earth and hell. As each pursues his own goals, interests clash. The only way to secure our own happiness is to pursue the glory of God and the good of the universe. The question is not whether we should desire and pursue our own happiness at all but whether we should make our own happiness our supreme end.

REBELS IN A HOLY EMPIRE

We are not simply under a government of naked law. This world is a province of God's empire. We have rebelled, and by a new and special provision God offers us mercy. The conditions are that we obey the precepts of the law and submit to the justice of the penalty. God's gospel supplements His government of law.

The gospel requires the same obedience as the law. It requires sinners to yield to the justice of the penalty. If the sinner were under mere law, it would require that he submit to the infliction of the penalty. But man is not and never has been, since the fall, under the government of mere law. He has always known, more or less clearly, that mercy is offered.

It has, therefore, never been required that men be willing to be punished. In this respect, gospel submission differs from legal submission. Under naked law, submission would consist in willingness to be punished. Submission consists in yielding to the justice of the penalty and regarding himself as deserving the eternal wrath of God.

The duty of every sovereign is to see that all his subjects submit to his government. If every individual obeys perfectly, his laws will promote the public good to the highest possible degree. Then, if anyone refuses to obey, the ruler must force that rebel to serve the public interest in the best way. If he will not serve voluntarily, he should be made to do it involuntarily.

God is a sovereign ruler, and the submission that He requires is exactly what He must require. He would be neglecting His duty as a ruler if He did not require it. If you have refused to obey this requirement, you are bound to throw yourself into His hands for Him to punish you in the way that will best promote the interests of the universe. You have forfeited all claim to the happiness of the universe or the favor of God. God requires that you acknowledge the justice of His law and leave your future entirely and unconditionally at His disposal. You must submit all you have and all you are to Him.

True submission requires complete acceptance of the terms of the gospel. They are repentance, holiness, faith, perfect trust, and confidence toward God. This leads you, without hesitation, to throw body and soul into His hand to do with you as He thinks good.

To receive Christ as mediator, advocate, atoning sacrifice, ruler, teacher--and in all the offices in which He is presented in God's Word--is true submission. This is true acquiescence to God's appointed way of salvation.

The Church is full of false hopes. Many people embrace what they consider the gospel without yielding to the law. They look at the law with dread and regard the gospel as a scheme to get away from the law. These tendencies have always been seen in men. Many hold to the gospel and reject the law, while others accept the law and neglect the gospel. The truth is that the rule of life is the same in both, and both require disinterested benevolence.

If a person thinks that under the gospel he may give up the glory of God as his supreme object and, instead of loving God with all his heart, and soul, and strength, may make his own salvation his supreme object, his hopes are false. He has embraced another gospel--which is no gospel at all

SUBMISSION UNTO SALVATION

Faith is not believing that you will be saved but believing God's Word concerning His Son. He has revealed the fact that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. What you call faith is more properly hope. The confident expectation that you will be saved is an inference from the act of faith and an inference which you have a right to draw when you are conscious of obeying the law and believing the gospel. When you exercise the feelings required in the law and gospel, you have a right to trust in Christ for your own salvation.

God wills that every soul be saved. That fact exercises disinterested benevolence. Suppose a man came to me and asked, "What must I do to be saved?" and I told him, "If you expect to be saved, you must despair of being saved"--what would he think? What inspired writer ever gave such direction? The answer is, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," "Repent," "Believe the gospel," and so on. Is there anything

here that implies despair?

Sinners do despair before they obtain true peace. But what is the reason? Despair is not essential to true peace. Many anxious sinners despair because they get a false impression that they have sinned away their day of grace or that they have committed the unpardonable sin. Sometimes they despair because they know that mercy will be provided as soon as they comply with the terms, but they find all their efforts at true submission vain. They find they are proud and obstinate and cannot consent to the terms of salvation. Perhaps most individuals who do submit come to a point where they give up all as lost. But is that necessary?

Nothing but their own wickedness drives them to despair. They are unwilling to accept God's mercy. Their despair, then, instead of being essential to true submission is inconsistent. No man ever embraced the gospel while in that state. To say despair is essential to true submission is saying that sin is essential to true submission!

Every Christian knows that God desires sinners to be saved. The true ground for salvation is that a man must not seek his own salvation but seek the glory of God.

What did the apostles tell sinners when they asked what they must do to be saved? What did Peter tell them at Pentecost? What did Paul tell the jailer--to repent, forsake their selfishness, and believe the gospel. This is what men must do to be saved.

Another difficulty exists in attempting to convert men in this way. It tries to convert them by the law and sets aside the gospel, trying to make them holy without the appropriate influences. Paul tried this way and found it didn't work. In Romans 7, he gives us the result. It drove him to confess that the law was holy and good, and he ought to obey it. It left him crying, "The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Romans 7:19). The law was not able to convert him, and he cried out, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24)

Here the love of God in sending His Son Jesus Christ is presented to his mind, and that did the work. In the next chapter, Paul explains it. "What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:3-4). The whole Bible testifies that only the influence of the gospel can bring sinners to obey the law. The law will never do it.

THE FATHER'S BROKEN HEART

The offer of mercy can be perverted, as every good thing can be, and then it can give rise to selfish religion. And God knew it when He revealed the gospel. But nothing is calculated to subdue the rebellious heart of man other than God's mercy.

There was a father who had a stubborn and rebellious son, and he tried to subdue him by chastisement. He loved his son and longed to have him virtuous and obedient. But the child seemed to harden his heart against his repeated efforts. Finally, the poor father was discouraged and burst into a flood of tears. "My son! What can I do? Can I save you? I have done all that I can to save you! What more can I do?"

The son had never yielded to the rod. But when he saw the tears rolling down his father's cheeks and heard his sobs, he, too, burst into tears. He cried out, "Whip me, Father! But don't cry!" The father had

hound the way to subdue that stubborn heart. Instead of holding the iron hand of law over him, he poured out his soul before him. And what was the effect? To crush him into hypocritical submission? No, the rod did that. The gushing tears of his father's love broke him down at once to true submission to his father's will.

The sinner braves the wrath of Almighty God and hardens himself to receive the heaviest bolt of thunder. Then he sees the love of his Heavenly Father's heart. When he sees God manifested in the flesh, stooping to take human nature, hanging on the cross, and pouring out his soul in tears, bloody sweat, and death, his heart melts. He cries out, "Do anything else, and I can bear it; but the love of the blessed Jesus overwhelms me."

To be thus influenced is the very nature of the mind. Instead of being afraid to exhibit the love of God to sinners, this is the only way to make them truly submissive. The law makes hypocrites, but only the gospel can draw souls to truly love God.

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