

Unbelief

by Charles Finney

Unbelief is a voluntary state of mind that withholds confidence from God's promises and is the opposite of faith, leading to guilt and spiritual death.

Scripture: Isaiah 26:3, Matthew 21:22, Mark 9:24, John 14:1, Romans 10:17, Ephesians 3:20, Hebrews 3:19, James 1:6, 2 Peter 1:4, 1 John 5:13

Topics: "Unbelief", "Faith and Trust in God"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the critical issue of unbelief, emphasizing that it is not merely a lack of faith but a deliberate rejection of God's truth and promises. He outlines the nature of unbelief, its manifestations, and the severe consequences it brings, including the inability to experience salvation and sanctification. Finney illustrates that unbelief is a sin that leads to guilt and dishonors God, as it denies the evidence of His love and faithfulness. He urges believers to recognize the importance of fully committing to their faith and trusting in God's promises for their lives. Ultimately, Finney calls for a rejection of unbelief in favor of a confident expectation of God's fulfillment of His promises.

Transcript

"So we see that they could not enter in, because of unbelief."--Heb. 3:19.

In this discourse I shall notice,

I. WHAT UNBELIEF IS NOT.

II. WHAT IT IS.

III. INSTANCES AND EVIDENCE OF UNBELIEF.

IV. THE TENDENCY OF UNBELIEF.

V. THE GUILT OF UNBELIEF.

I. What unbelief is not.

1. It is not a negative state of mind. It is represented in the Bible as sin; it cannot, therefore, be a mere negation.

2. Nor is it ignorance. Ignorance may be caused by unbelief, turning away the attention from the objects of faith. But ignorance itself is not unbelief. Nor is it absence of conviction. This is often an effect of unbelief.

II. What it is.

1. It is represented in the Bible as sin. It must then, be a voluntary state of mind. It cannot belong either to the intelligence or the sensibility. For the action of both these powers is necessary.

2. It is the opposite of faith. Faith is represented as voluntary. It cannot, therefore, be conviction, since this belongs to the intelligence. It is trust or confidence in God; it is a committing of the soul to Him; as Peter says, 'Commit the keeping of your soul to Him.'

3. Generically, faith as distinguished from everything else, is confidence in God; but specifically, it is confidence in Christ, or in any fact, doctrine, promise, or threatening of the Bible. And I might add, in any truth whatever, historical, philosophical, or mathematical; or even in error. If it respects the promises of God, it is a confident assurance that they will be fulfilled. If it respects facts, it is confidence in the truthfulness of the fact. Unbelief is the opposite of this. It is a withholding of confidence from what God says; it is distrust; it is a refusal to commit or give up the mind to the influence of a truth or promise; it is a rejection of evidence. For example; take any of the facts recorded in the Bible. Unbelief, is a refusal to credit their truthfulness, or to allow them that influence which they deserve. For instance, look at the manner in which the Jews treated the miracles of Christ. Christ claimed to be the Messiah, and in attestation of his claim, performed many wonderful works. Here was evidence that He really was what He professed to be. If He had not furnished such evidence, it would not have been unbelief to reject his claim. He might have lived and died among them, without their incurring any guilt by rejecting Him. But the works which He performed, were such as ought to have secured the confidence of every beholder, and established his claim in every mind. But instead of yielding to the evidence thus presented, they stedfastly resisted Him, and ascribed his miracles to infernal agency; and it would seem, that their disposition to reject Him was so strong, that no amount of evidence which He could place before them, could overcome it. Now this was unbelief. We may apply the same principle to other things. Take, for example, the doctrine of Phrenology. If an individual really lacks evidence of its truth, it is not unbelief to reject it. On the contrary, to receive it without such evidence, would be mere credulity. But just as far as he has evidence of its truth, it is unbelief to refuse to treat it accordingly. So with the doctrines of the Second Advent. If an individual has not such evidence of their truth, as to answer the demands of his intelligence, it is not unbelief to reject them. But if he has such evidence, then to reject them is unbelief. We might apply the same principle to the doctrine of Sanctification, or any other doctrine whatever, whether true or false.

4. But especially is it unbelief, where individuals confess themselves convinced and do not act accordingly. If an individual confesses himself convinced of the truth of the doctrine of the Second Advent, if he does not commit his mind to the full influence of that doctrine, it is unbelief; or if he admits the truth of the doctrine of Entire Sanctification, and does not commit himself to it, and expect to realize it in his own case, he is guilty of unbelief. And it is unbelief, whether he admits it or not, if he has reasonable evidence of its truth, and yet does not yield his whole being up to its influence.

III. Instances and evidences of unbelief.

1. A heathen who never heard the gospel, is not an unbeliever as respects Christ, in any proper sense of the word; He knows nothing about it, and consequently, withholds no confidence from it; but a man who lives under the gospel, and is not controlled by it, is an unbeliever.

2. A want of assurance of salvation through Christ, is unbelief. This must be so, if the Atonement is general, and if faith consists in believing what is said respecting it. The Apostle says, 'that this is the record which God hath given to us, eternal life, and this life is in his Son.' Now if it be true that God hath given eternal life to all, then not to possess an assurance of your own salvation through Christ, is unbelief.

3. Not being duly influenced by any perceived truth, is unbelief; no matter what that truth is. Faith is a disposition to be influenced by it, or the committing of the mind to its influence, in exact accordance with its perceived importance.

4. The absence of a firm confidence and expectation, that we shall realize the truth of every promise given to us, is unbelief. For example, God has promised to parents, to bless their children; then, not to have the most confident assurance that He will do so, is unbelief. And the same is true respecting every promise, either of justification or sanctification.

5. God has promised the salvation of all that believe; now, to doubt whether we shall be saved, is both an evidence and an instance of unbelief. Remember too, that the salvation promised, is salvation from both sin and hell. To this, it is objected, that the promise of salvation is conditional; and, says the objector, I have no right to believe that I shall be saved, until I have believed in Christ; for faith, is the condition of the promise, and to require me to believe that I shall be saved, before I believe in Christ, is to require me to believe a fact before it is true. To this, I answer,

(1.) By inquiring of the objector what I am to believe about Christ? Plainly, I am to believe in Him, as the Savior. That is, that He tasted death for every man, and that He hath given us eternal life. Two things, then, I must believe; first, that He died for all, and of course, for me; and secondly, that He will save me. Suppose an angel should believe that Christ died for all the world, would that be faith in Christ? Certainly not, in the sense in which the Bible requires us to believe in Him; and I do not believe, in any proper sense, unless I believe He died for me.

I must believe, not only, that He died for all, but for me; not only that justification is offered to all, but to me; and true faith, is accepting of eternal salvation at his hand. Now observe what the objection is; that the realization of the promise, is conditioned on faith, and that the condition must be fulfilled, before I can believe that the promise will be realized, and I shall be saved. This is a mere trick. It is to suppose a promise given, but on a condition that nullifies it.

Suppose a rich father should give his son a promise in writing, and under oath, that he would supply all his wants, and should send him abroad, but the condition demanded of the son, was that he should exercise full faith in the promise. He must believe, that it will secure for him a supply of money in any of the banks of Europe, according to the tenor of the writing. Now, I want to know, if this is a condition that would nullify the promise. Plainly not, since the condition is not arbitrary, but naturally essential to its fulfillment.

If he does not confide in the promise, and expect its fulfillment it is naturally impossible that it should be fulfilled. On the contrary, how plain it is, that faith in the promise naturally secures its fulfillment. God has given the promise of eternal salvation to all that believe. The condition is not arbitrary, but natural, so that the fulfillment of the promise to each individual necessarily depends on his faith in it. Now is it faith to stand away back, and say, Christ died for everybody else, and will save everybody else, if they will believe, and not believe yourself?

What a strange objection! The truth is, if this objection be good, it nullifies every promise in the Bible. God has promised to convert the world, but the fulfillment of this promise, is conditioned on the faith of Christians. For them to believe it, is to deliver themselves up to it, and preach the gospel to them. Now does this condition hinder faith? Is it a sly and artful means of evasion, put in by the promiser to prevent the necessity of his ever fulfilling the promise?

Nay, but the condition is natural, and involves the expectation of the thing promised. So God has promised to bless the children of believers, if they will believe; that is, if they will give themselves up to this truth. Now to believe, is to fulfill the condition, and for persons to take the ground of the objector, is to stumble themselves. The objection, then, cannot be good.

(2.) In every case, faith expects the fulfillment of the promise, and this expectation is not founded upon the promise itself, but on the general character of the promiser. When God gives any promise, if an individual does not believe in it, because he believes in the general character of God, he cannot believe in it at all. Without confidence in the benevolence and veracity of God, it is impossible to rely upon his promises; but confidence in these, naturally secures such reliance.

(3.) God has promised to justify and sanctify every believer, or every one who will believe and expect this of Him. The condition is natural, and it is nonsense to say, that we cannot expect to be justified and sanctified until after we have believed; for to believe, is to expect. Not to expect, is unbelief; for to expect in this case, is implied in faith. Much has been said about appropriating faith, and I have been struck with the fact, that believers in a limited Atonement, have much to say about appropriating faith. But a limited Atonement and appropriating faith can't go together. If the former is true, the latter is impossible without a new revelation. For if Christ died for only a part of mankind, and has not revealed who they are, I would ask, how any one can appropriate Him to himself, without a direct revelation that he is one of the elect. But right over against this class, those who believe in a general Atonement, are consistent enough in holding the doctrine of appropriating faith; for to appropriate, is simply to accept of Christ, as presented in the gospel. If Christ died for all, then each may appropriate Him, and this is faith. Whoever does not appropriate Him, just as He is presented, rejects; he is an unbeliever.

(4.) Finally, if this objection is true, salvation is impossible; for if I can never expect to be saved by Christ until after I have believed, I can never expect it at all; for I have said, true faith, and the expectation of salvation by Him, are identical.

IV. The tendency of unbelief.

1. It defeats all God's efforts to save those who exercise it. As I have said already, faith is the natural condition of salvation, and is a voluntary exercise. It cannot, therefore, be forced; and therefore, if an individual will not believe, he must be damned.

2. It defeats all his efforts to sanctify us. Sanctification is nothing else than delivering up the mind to the truth and promises of God. To think, then, that we can be saved while we reject the promises, is to overlook the very nature of sanctification.

3. It renders heart obedience impossible, for 'without faith, it is impossible to please God.'

4. It prevents the possibility of true peace. The unbeliever does not know what true peace is. His condition, is in some respects, like that of a person in sleep, who has terrible dreams, who supposes himself

surrounded with dangers from flood, or fire, or dreadful circumstances; perhaps suffering shipwreck, and just on the point of being swallowed up in the waves. Perhaps he is struggling to escape from devouring flames, or he walks a miserable outcast from society, troubled on every side, and finding nothing on which he can repose, his agony is indescribable, but in a moment he awakes, and behold, he is in a warm bed in his own secure dwelling. He thanks God it is a dream. How great the contrast between his present state and that in which his dreams placed him. So the convicted unbeliever is tossed with agitation, he looks this way and that, but finds no rest. 'He is like the troubled sea, whose waters cast up mire and dirt.' 'There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.' Now mark; as soon as he believes, what a change comes over him. It is like the sun breaking out in an ocean of storms. He sees promises on every side, like the mountains round about Jerusalem. He sees provisions for all his wants, and why should he be troubled any more. 'Bless the Lord, O my soul,' he cries. What is this? Why here, instead of bondage, misery and death, is endless life and peace; and the broad river of love, as pure as that which flows from under the throne of God, begins to pour its current through my soul.

5. Unbelief renders it impossible for Christ to keep us from sin. The Bible, however full of promises, may rot before him, and he go down to hell notwithstanding. Unbelief nullifies them all, and leaves nothing to help him.

6. It delivers the soul over into the hands of the world, the flesh, and the devil. There is no power in the universe can protect him against their influence, without his own consent, for the very reason that he is a free being. Withholding faith from God, and delivering himself up to their influence, he becomes the sport and play of every temptation that besets him.

V. The guilt of unbelief.

1. It is the wilful rejection of the highest evidence God can give. Suppose you had an enemy who always suspected you of an intention to injure him, and although you had often tried to remove his suspicions, he should still hold this opinion. Suppose he should fall into great difficulties, and you should take much pains to help him out, you should relieve the wants of his family, and provide for his children, but still he should suspect you had some sinister end in all this, which would eventually come out; would you not think him vastly unreasonable and guilty in maintaining such prejudices?

But suppose, finally, his house should take fire, and he and his family were in an upper story, while it was raging in every apartment below. No one can afford help; there are no ladders and no means of escape. The floor beneath him begins to give way, and the roof is about falling in; they stand at the windows and shriek for help. Suddenly one rushes through the flames, from one flight of stairs to another, with his hair and clothes on fire, till he reaches the miserable family.

He instantly seizes him with one strong arm, and his children with the other, and carries them safely below. While he is doing this, the man swoons with terror. As soon as he opens his eyes, he finds himself in the arms of his deliverer, who, with the utmost solicitude and tenderness, is fanning him, and is using means to restore him; and whose first exclamation is, "your children are all safe." He soon discovers that his benefactor is no other than the object of his former suspicions.

Now suppose he should still not be convinced, what an abomination would this be. How every one would execrate such a wilful and unreasonable rejection of the highest evidence you could give of your benevolence towards him. But suppose farther, he were condemned to death, and you should voluntarily step forward and die for him. What an amazing prejudice and obstinacy would be manifest, if he should

entertain suspicions of the sincerity of your love. Now let me ask, what further evidence God could give of his love to mankind than He has given?

Besides crowning their life with as many blessings as their circumstances render it possible to bestow, He adds the gift of his own Son to die for them; and has thus given the highest possible evidence He could, of his good will towards them. What damning guilt, then, must their unbelief be. Suppose the sovereign of an extensive empire, is seeking to promote the highest possible good of his subjects, through the administration of the most excellent laws. But one province of his empire goes into rebellion.

He has power to crush it at once. But suppose, that instead of marching an army, bristling with bayonets, among them, and desolating them with fire and sword, he should lay aside the robes of royalty, and in a most unassuming manner, go among them, and attempt to teach them the nature of his own character and laws, and the importance of conformity to his will, in order to their own highest good. But suppose again, they would not believe him, but suspect him of some sinister motive, how astonishing this would be; and if, to convince them of his love, he should even die for them, who would not expect this to subdue the rebellion?

Now see the blessed God administering the law of benevolence impartially, throughout his universe. Our world rebels. He comes in the person of his Son, in the humble guise of humanity; He goes about among mankind, revealing to them the character and will of God, and endeavoring to secure their confidence. And when they reject his instructions and will not believe, rather than fail to accomplish his end, He dies for them on the cross. What higher evidence could God give of his love to man than this? and how outrageous is the unbelief, which wilfully rejects it all? What more could He do? Can you think of anything more? How damning then, must be the guilt of unbelief!

2. It is treating God in the worst possible manner. We never do our friends a worse injury, than when we distrust them without a cause. Should a husband become jealous and distrustful of his wife, without a cause, what greater injury could he do her? It would pierce like a dagger to her heart. Or, should a wife manifest unreasonable suspicions respecting her husband, what more could she do to render him wretched? He would say, have you any reasons for your suspicions? Let me ask that husband who is conscious of his integrity, and has tender sensibilities--let me ask that wife, who is virtuous, and values the confidence of her husband, as she should--how would you feel? How would you expostulate in the circumstances supposed?--and what would be more directly calculated to bring the blight of death upon the peace of a family, than such unreasonable distrust, on the part of a husband or wife? Now look at God's great family. What family ever had such cause of confidence, as God's has?--and what father, ever had such cause of complaint? What husband was ever so distrusted, by a wife, as the blessed God, by the Church which He has bought with his own blood? See that husband; he is pouring his complaints all abroad, and loading down the air with his sighs. Now, I ask again, if this want of confidence is not the worst possible kind of treatment? Men naturally feel insulted, whenever their veracity and integrity are called in question. And has God no sensibility? Is it no grief to Him to be treated as a liar, the world over?

3. It is dishonoring God in the highest degree before others. Suppose a father should send his son to a University, and should give him a book of checks, assuring him, that they were good to supply all his wants. But suppose the son should show that he had no confidence in it, and should be seen managing around to meet his expenses, and to obtain his books. Would not this be to publish the worst things, in the most effectual way about his father? What then does unbelief publish about God? See that professor of religion, with the Bible in his hands, full of promises, going all about, complaining and mourning over his

spiritual poverty, when God has said, that He is 'more willing to give his Holy Spirit to them that ask it, than earthly parents are to give good gifts to their children.' And that ' his grace shall be sufficient for us.' What is he doing? Why he is representing God in the worst possible light, as guilty, not only of lying, but of lying under oath; for 'God willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath; that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the only hope set before us.'

REMARKS.

1. We see what to think of those, who say they cannot realize that the promises will be fulfilled. Can't realize! Hark! Suppose your child should say, Pa, you promised to give me a New Year's present, but I can't realize that you will. You would say, my child, do you think I lie? Have I not given you my word, that I would give you a present? What higher evidence can men have than the solemn word and oath of God? What shall make it more sure? Who shall underwrite for Him? If what He has said does not satisfy you, He can give no security. Can't realize! Horrible!

2. We see what to think of those who say they believe, but are not duly influenced by their faith. They profess to believe in the necessity of salvation, and in the eternity of hell torments; but then neither act respecting themselves or others, as the magnitude of these truths demand. The fact is, they don't believe at all.

3. We see, that no doctrine is believed any farther than it influences the conduct. What is faith? It is, as we have shown, the delivering of the mind up to the influence of known truth. It follows, then, that there is no faith where the conduct remains uninfluenced.

4. Heretical conduct proves heretical faith. The truth is, all heresy belongs to the heart; and however holy a man's creed may be, if his conduct is wrong, he is heretical in heart.

5. We see the wickedness of admitting that the gospel proffers entire sanctification in this life, and yet not expecting it. There are those, as you know who admit that the gospel proffers entire sanctification, on condition of faith--they admit that its provisions are ample, and yet do not expect to possess it in this life. What is that, but unbelief?

6. We see also the wickedness of saying, that the expectation of it is unreasonable and erroneous. They say, that to believe we shall actually attain it in this life is a great, and dangerous error. What is that but unbelief in its worst form?

7. Also the guilt of those, who teach men, that it is an error to expect sanctification in this life, and raise the cry of heresy against those who do teach them to expect it. If it is promised, it must be sheer unbelief and dreadful guilt to doubt it.

8. The good men who formerly rejected this doctrine, did not see, and admit, the fulness of the provisions. President Edwards, for example, did not admit this, and it is manifest, from the account which he gives of his wife's experience, as well as from his writings generally, that he had no such idea before his mind.

9. But what shall we say of those who make this admission, and yet do not expect the blessing? They do not seem to understand that this is unbelief. They say, they do not distrust God, but they distrust themselves. This is a great mistake. If faith is implicit confidence in God's promises, and if these promises cover full provisions for sanctification, then there is no room left for self-distrust; and in that case,

self-distrust is distrust in God. Take, for example, this promise. 'And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body, be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it.' Here is a promise, covering the wants of our whole nature. Now, I want to know what state of mind that is, which does not expect its realization? Whether it is self-distrust, or distrust in God? It is downright unbelief. It is virtually saying, Lord, Thou hast promised to 'sanctify me wholly in soul, body, and spirit,' but I don't believe it. I don't believe thou canst, I have such distrust in myself.

10. There is no consistency in making the admission of full provisions, and then rejecting the expectation of being sanctified by them.

11. How can the expectation of being sanctified in this life, be rejected without unbelief, in view of I Thess. 5:23, 24. Suppose I get up, and read over this promise--'And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body, be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it,' and then turn round and say, now brethren, I warn you against believing that He will sanctify you. But the promise comes thundering back--'Faithful is He that calleth you who also will do it.' I rally again, and say, Edwards, and Payson, and Brainerd, were not sanctified, and why should you expect to be? What would that differ from the course adopted by most of the ministers at the present time? But here comes up the old cavil, that although provisions are made, yet they are conditioned on faith, and I have no right to expect sanctification till I believe. I answer, faith and expectation are identical; and if you do not expect sanctification, you do not believe God, and are making Him a liar.

12. To tell men not to expect to be wholly sanctified in this life, and preserved blameless, is to warn them not to believe God.

13. You can see why you do not enter into rest. It is because you have no faith. You have not cast your anchor within the veil. You are like a vessel, drifting along the majestic Niagara, towards the falls, and already approaching destruction; but will not let down its anchor, although it knows the rocks are within reach, upon which it might fasten and be safe. Or, like a man in a dungeon, to whom a golden chain is let down, and who is exhorted to lay hold and be drawn up, but will not.

14. It is wicked to expect to sin all our days. God has said, 'Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law, but under grace.' Therefore, to expect to live, carrying about a load of sin, till you die, is abominable wickedness.

15. The Church is never like[ly] to be holy, while it is exhorted to unbelief, instead of faith. It is a horrible thing, that much of the teaching of the present day, is nothing else than teaching men not to believe God. And lest they should expect sanctification, they are pointed back to those, who profess to come short of it--to antinomian perfectionism--and to every thing which may bring the doctrine into disrepute, and are warned against it, as if it were the pestilence. O, my soul, what is this! Is this the way the Church is to be sanctified? My brethren if you mean to be kept from sin, and antinomianism of every kind, and from every other delusion, take hold of these promises, and believe. Expect them to be fulfilled, and they will be. But if you doubt you shall walk in blindness. For says the Prophet, 'If ye will not believe, ye shall not be established.'

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