

Variety in the Service Offered to God

by Charles Finney

True Christianity comes from serving God from love and benevolence, not from fear or hope for reward.

Scripture: Isaiah 56:4

Topics: "Service to God", "True Motivation in Faith"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the variety of service offered to God, categorizing believers into three classes: bond-servants motivated by fear, mercenaries seeking reward, and true servants who serve out of love for God. He explains that the first two classes lack genuine joy and connection to God, as their service is driven by self-interest rather than a desire to please Him. In contrast, true servants are characterized by their love for God and others, leading to a spontaneous and fulfilling relationship with Him. Finney urges listeners to reflect on their motivations for serving God and to strive for a relationship rooted in love rather than fear or self-gain.

Transcript

"For thus saith the Lord unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant;

Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls, a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters; I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off.

Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be his servants, every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant;

Even them will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people."

[Isa. 56:4-7]

Among the people who profess to serve God are three distinct classes, distinguishable by obvious characteristics. It will be my present object to point out these classes and their distinctive marks.

I. The first class are bond-servants;--persons whose ruling motive in all they do is fear. The service they render is not natural, but constrained. Usually they have a good deal of conviction and an unusual degree of light on religious subjects. They know what sin is and cannot indulge in it without conviction of wrong doing. They have so much sense of religious obligation that they dare not neglect God, but are forced to think often and much of their relations to him and of his relations to them. Their own personal guilt and danger are often before their minds. It is not uncommon for such persons to dream fearful dreams, their minds being haunted even in sleep by the strong impression that they are wrong and in peril. This fear underlies all their religion. Consequently it makes them strict in what they call their religious duties. And when their fears are specially active they will be specially careful in their business transactions as well as in all their religious duties.

When their convictions of sin and their fears of danger subside, their religious duties are relatively neglected and they become also less strict in their business affairs.

Another mark is that their hope of heaven is more or less strong according as they find themselves more or less strict in their religious duties, and on the other hand is more or less weak according as they indulge their appetites more and are less thorough in their devotions. With the decline of hope comes a revival of fear; and following this, fresh efforts to bring up in the line of duties and strictness. When this is pretty well brought up, hope revives again, the spirit of duty-doing flags; appetite conquers; then comes awful fear again; and so the wheel revolves, bringing up each development in its turn, in one perpetual round.

Again, these persons have no true joy in the service they render to God. It is impossible they should have because their service has no love in it. They have no sympathy or interest in the great ends God has in view, and they cannot have, so long as their hearts are supremely selfish. God chooses for his great end the highest happiness he can produce. If they sympathized with his great end, they would be benevolent. But in order to this, the very fundamental things in their character must be changed.

As they have no interest in God's great end, so have they none in the means He would have them use to promote this end. The thing that supremely interests them is to build up a hope. Hence if they can do a great deal, they obtain a self-righteous satisfaction and a feeling that now they are "engaged" and are doing their duty.

In proportion as they can silence their fears they get more hope and hence they value everything that obviates their fears. They lay the greatest stress upon a "good hope," valuing nothing else in any wise so much. Their hope costs them a great deal. They had to work hard to get it and they have hard and constant trouble to keep it. It needs a deal of nursing, so much that this becomes an important part of their business for life.

In seasons of great fear, they are prone to look at others and comparing themselves with others, they manage to bolster up their hope.

They keep up a sort of warfare against temptation, but their warfare is never triumphant. They find comfort only as they assume that none can gain much victory over sin and temptation in the present life, and as they compare themselves with others.

If they do anything for benevolent objects, fear underlies it all. They fear they shall not be prospered and that the judgments of God will be upon them. They give, under the hope they shall escape God's frown thereby.

They refrain from follies and crimes only for the same reason. Fear underlies all, their nervous temperament is greatly excited by their fears and this becomes the main-spring of all their activities. If you hear them pray or talk, you can at once read their character. They will surely show that fear and hope are the main-springs of their life; that all they do is done, and all they refrain from doing is abstained from because of its bearing on their hopes and their fears. Their fear may embrace various objects; it may be fear of final ruin, or fear of losing reputation or hope.

Again, all their religious works are performed with a sense of drudgery and pain. If they were to speak right out what they think, they would say, religion is a very expensive thing to us. It costs us a great deal of painful self-denial. They would say as a young girl said to me once about her religion. Not long since three young girls came together to see me at my room. The first told me she had got religion. I saw she was gay and dressy, and therefore said to her;--"Is it not a pity that at your age you should be obliged to become religious and lose all the pleasures this world can give? If you only knew you should not die too soon, would not you enjoy it much better to live as you please, unrestrained by religious obligations?" Yes, said she, if I had only known I should not die, it would no doubt have been pleasant for me to enjoy the world. The second of the three sympathized with her, saying, if she could only have been sure of not dying before she was ready it would have been pleasant to enjoy more of the world. But the third looked greatly surprised, and then grieved and began to weep. It would be no pleasure, she said, to her to have all this world could give,--she could not enjoy it, because it would grieve the Savior. What! said I, would you not like to have the world if you could? No; no: all I want is to please my Savior. I could enjoy nothing unless it should be pleasing to him. Then I had no occasion to tell the first two they had no religion. The third had answered every question so warmly from her heart and so impressively through her tears, that they needed no other testimony to show them that they had not begun to serve God at all yet.

Many are not aware that the underlying influence in all their religion, is fear. This works deep in their mind; yet they do not analyze their own mental states and go deep even to the core. They really rely much more on public sentiment as to the grounds of a hope, than on any thorough knowledge of what faith is or holiness; as you may see by the interest they feel in noticing what others do for a good hope. What others do for a religion they too strive to do, so as not to fall below the public standard. Others may think them very pious; but at the very moment while others are applauding, they are very uncomfortable, considered in reference to their own state of mind, besides exerting a very uncomfortable influence on others.

Now it is easy to see that all this is really self-service; not any service rendered to God. To this kind of service, God promises no reward. However deep, earnest, constant and uniform it may be, there is nothing in it for God to reward.

II. The next class may be called mercenaries. They differ constitutionally from the first class; inasmuch as these serve for reward: those, to escape punishment: these act under the influence of hope; those of fear. This second class have little fear and little conscience. The motive power in their minds is the idea of profit. Religion is respectable, especially in a place like this. Indeed, in most places there is a kind of respectability attached to religion which everybody apprehends. Some are very much influenced by this consideration. I remember that about the only time I ever had the observance of the Sabbath urged upon me, it was done by a young man who told me it would give me respectability in society. Look all round you, said he; you will see that the most respectable people go to meeting. It will be much to your profit to associate with them. It will secure you a place in their confidence. Men will employ you. Any slave holder will pay extra for a pious slave. So in every community, attendance on religious worship is profitable. It will secure the confidence of teachers, neighbors, employers; will ensure you better credit and a fairer

reputation; will elevate you in society, especially if you go to a respectable church and associate with respectable people. Sabbath keeping is pleasant, and in many respects agreeable.

So it is respectable to give to charitable objects. Many say they never lose anything by giving moderately to charitable objects. They get more patronage in their own business. If they help build churches, they find it pays well. Hence there are the best of reasons for such donations.

In the same manner, prayer is profitable. It will secure the divine direction in your business, and who cannot afford to pay well for such counsel? In short, all religious duties pay well. This is the reason why mercenary Christians perform them. This love of the profit underlies all their religious duties. They take the same kind of interest in religion that men do in profitable business. God is good, say they, and hence will be a good paymaster. Said a man to me who was at the point of death,--"I am prepared to die, I think; I don't know that I have ever done anything wrong. I have always been to meeting of a Sabbath; I am sure I have always been in my place in the sanctuary." Many who cannot say so much as this think they have done some good to off-set whatever evil they may have done; and since the Lord is not a hard but a generous master, they feel quite confident that He will balance the books in their favor.

This class of persons, as I have said, do not serve God from fear, but from hope. They go into it as a good and a paying business. They do not toil hard, for they don't suppose it necessary, and their toil does not come hard to them, because they expect a handsome reward for it. They work cheerfully as those who are driving a good business. Their religion is not a yoke of bondage. They call it "gospel liberty." They will be all the more earnest and zealous, by how much the stronger are their hope and expectation of eternal life. They are laying up treasure in heaven, why should they not be cheerful and hopeful? They make reward their end; mistake presumption for faith; the love of gain for the love of God. It does not lie before their minds as the love of gain, yet it is so, none the less truly.

Such are only mercenaries. They serve not God but self.

III. The third and only acceptable class of servants are described in our text. God says of them,--"They do the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant. They join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants."

If we trace back the history of this class, we shall find that they once lived in sin; that they became awake to their guilt and convinced of their sin; were led to consider the character of God, the nature and spirit of his law; that they became interested in these objects, so that although they commenced their inquiries under convictions of danger and peril, yet they found themselves interested in God's character; they saw the fitness and excellence of his law and the glory of his gospel, and though they may be quite unable to tell when or where they embraced this gospel and committed themselves to its principles, yet this they know--that they became intensely interested in God, in Christ, and in the entire scheme of the gospel. They are not thinking now about their hope, but about Christ's work, his great mission; its success and their own responsibilities in promoting it. Look into the heart of one of these Christians;--he seems to have dropped all fear, to have forgotten himself; he has ceased to pray much or chiefly for himself; has given himself up to a deep sympathy with the whole movement. When he comes to look within to the state of his inner impulses, he thinks this must be true religion; yet very possibly he had been in this state a long time before he saw it. He started selfishly, but lost his selfishness before the wonderful cross of the Savior! He dropt [sic.] it there, when he saw and believed the love that God hath toward us. Then and thenceforward his religion became entirely spontaneous. He gave himself up to prayer for others. Neither hope nor fear is

uppermost in his mind; but the love of God and the love of man--these are quite first and uppermost in all the inner workings of his mind. All his religion is spontaneous. He loves his work because he is unified with Christ in his great enterprise and in the all-controlling benevolence of his heart.

Observe also that although this class do not seek hope, yet they have it all the more. They have it the more because they do not seek it. It comes to them by a natural law. It springs up unconsciously and uncalled for as they find themselves drawn into deeper sympathy with Christ and with holiness, and as they see without an effort that their souls are breathing the spirit of Christ and are already ripe for the benevolent employments of the heavenly state. They cannot perhaps remember the last time they prayed they might go to heaven; but they know they have been nerved day by day to pray that they may be strong in God to do every duty and bear all suffering for his name.

REMARKS.

1. The hope that needs nursing is a snare of death. If you are compelled to take pains to nurse your hope and take pains to keep it alive, rely on what I say, it is a snare of death to your soul.

2. Many as soon as they come to lose their hope are zealous in religion, till they get it back; then their zeal and effort decline. I have lately met with a painful case, in illustration of this. A man called on me as an old acquaintance,--so changed however that I could not recognize him at all. He had long been a professed Christian, but long too had he been the veriest slave to intoxicating drink. I never shall forget the impression of a ruined man which his whole appearance made on my mind. He began to relate his recent exercises and said,--I think I have now found the Savior, but I had almost lost my soul because I have been spending this whole winter in trying to regain my lost hope. What a snare that old hope has been to me! It had well nigh ruined me by preventing me from coming to my Savior. My life for many long years has been full of wretchedness. There has been scarce a night for years when the drink has been out of me but I have been in dreadful horror and almost in utter despair. This past winter my mind has been thoroughly aroused to fly for refuge to Christ, yet as I said, I begun with vain efforts to get back my old hope. At last I gave up that pursuit and thought I might better try to find Christ. Through his great mercy, I trust I have found him.

So, many try to get back an old and perished hope. It would be both easier and safer for them to try to find Christ.

3. Sinners who are here yet unconverted can see the distinction I have made. You can see that the first two classes are not truly religious, but are deeply deluded. You can see what kind of people they are and how they came into such delusions. Some of them are in the seventh of Romans, and never have any other or better Christian experience than that. Said a merchant to me,--I have just lost a brother-in-law by death and I think his history may be of use to you as a warning to others. He was remarkably fond of show, greedy of gain, and loved money as he loved his own soul, and withal was exceedingly fond of making a parade of his wealth; yet he always found it for his interest to be very religious and to do a great deal of religious duty. I saw him when he was at the point of death and said to him--are you really prepared to die? He replied,--"Yes, no doubt of it. I take this view of the case. If there is a Savior I have got him, for I have always done all my religious duties; and on the other hand, if there is no Savior, there is no hell and I am safe." But even now, on the verge of the grave, he was as grasping for money as man could be. Money had all his heart. His faith was mere presumption;--a most terrible and fatal mistake! His ruling spirit was a greedy, grasping spirit, and this led him to grasp the rewards of religion among the rest. He

laid hold of Christ, in the sense in which he did so at all, only for the sake of future salvation. He wanted to get gain, and since this might be a good investment, lying over in the future state, where he had laid up no other possessions, he thought it wise to lay up a store of religious merit by means of some external duty-doing. If heaven had really been on sale, his plan might have been successful, that is, if it had been in the market at his price!

And now, my hearers, let this case and the great truth which underlies it be made thoroughly practical to each heart. Let each one ask himself--Have I done all my religious duties for reward? Have I been nothing better than a mercenary in God's service? Have I studied only respectability, and done my religious duties only for the sake of my reputation? I charge my soul before God to answer these questions in all truth and honesty. What is the fact in regard to my religious life? Have I thoroughly given myself away to Christ? Have I embarked everything in this great service? How is it with you, my brother--with you, my sister?

I have been speaking of the third class who are truly religious and who regard themselves as humble followers of Christ; but some of you belong to a class who do not think themselves religious. Will you set yourselves to find the place where you do belong? Consider that the first two classes whom I have described have no reward whatever. You can see for yourselves that they are not honestly serving God as his true servants. Settle it therefore in your minds that you do not want such a religion. Those who are not seeking reward, but who serve God from love are the only true Christians and are all the more sure of reward by how much the less selfishly they seek it. Nay more, they have their reward here as they go along, and cannot help having it, in their very hearts as well as through the divine favor, because they really give up their souls to benevolence as God does. Benevolence is its own reward, and would be reward enough even if there were no God, or if God should see fit not to superadd his blessing. But God will superadd his blessing, as truly as He is good.

Hence none but the real Christian makes any real profit from his religion. And he gets his profit not because he seeks it in a mercenary spirit, but because he gives himself up to doing the will of God with all his heart, and leaves the whole question of profit and reward with his Lord and Master.

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