

Weakness of Heart

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of a strong heart in resisting temptation and living a holy life, and provides guidance on how to strengthen the heart through faith, love, knowledge, and prayer.

Scripture: Psalm 27:14, Proverbs 3:5-6, Isaiah 40:31, Ezekiel 16:30, Romans 8:31, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Philippians 4:13, Hebrews 4:16, James 1:5, 1 Peter 5:8-9

Topics: "Overcoming Temptation", "Spiritual Strength"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the 'Weakness of Heart' in the Church, emphasizing the importance of understanding the heart as the ruling disposition of the will. He explains that a weak heart is not divided or wicked but lacks the strength to resist temptation, leading to various evidences of weakness such as susceptibility to sin and difficulty in prayer. Finney outlines causes of this weakness, including ignorance and unbelief, and presents waiting on the Lord as the remedy, which involves active prayer, repentance, and a deepening relationship with God. He concludes that true strength of heart comes from an increase in knowledge, faith, and love towards God, enabling believers to resist temptation effectively.

Transcript

TEXT--Ezek. 16:30: "How weak is thine heart."

In this connection the Prophet is speaking of the Church, in reference to her past history. He says nothing of the real piety of the different generations of the Church; but in view of all her backslidings and inconsistencies, he exclaims, "How weak is thine heart!"

In discussing this subject, I will show:

- I. WHAT IS TO BE UNDERSTOOD BY THE TERM HEART, IN THIS TEXT.
- II. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN WEAKNESS OF HEART.
- III. MENTION SOME THINGS THAT ARE EVIDENCES OF A WEAK HEART.
- IV. SOME THINGS THAT CAUSE WEAKNESS OF HEART.
- V. THE REMEDY FOR WEAKNESS OF HEART.
- VI. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN STRENGTHENING THE HEART.

I. What is the heart.

Under this head I remark:

1. The language is figurative of necessity, as we have no language by which to represent states of the mind, only as we seize upon some analogy that exists between mental states and material things by which to express these mental states.
2. The term heart is used in a great variety of senses in the Bible. Sometimes it manifestly means the conscience--sometimes the whole mind, or soul--but whenever it is spoken of as a state of mind that has moral character, and as the foundation or fountain of moral exercises, it must represent a voluntary state of mind. When it is thus used, it cannot mean any faculty of the mind, but the particular attitude of the will in relation to moral subjects. There must be some analogy between the fleshly organ of the body, called the heart, and the heart of the mind. The bodily heart propels the blood and keeps up the vital action of the whole system. It is in this sense the center of organic life. Out of it flows, by the force of its own contractions, that vital current, which sustains both organic and animal life.
3. The heart of the mind is a voluntary disposition or preference of the mind. It is a disposition in opposition to a single exercise. It consists in a permanent, though voluntary attitude of the will, in relation to God and spiritual objects. It is a ruling disposition, or preference, in such a sense as to be the fountain, out of which, as it were, flow those individual volitions and exercises of mind, that make up its moral history. Therefore, as the bodily heart sustains organic and animal life, and may be regarded as the fountain, from which the vital current flows, so the mental heart, this ruling disposition or preference of which I have spoken, is the fountain from which obedience to God, or spiritual life flows.

II. What is implied in weakness of heart.

1. Not an opposite, heart ruling preference or attitude of the will. This cannot be; for the heart consists in a supreme disposition and ruling preference. Now it is impossible that there should be two supreme and opposite dispositions, or preferences in exercise at the same time.
2. Not a divided heart. This also is impossible. Let it be distinctly kept in mind, that the spiritual or moral heart is a supreme disposition, or ruling preference of the will. Now it is impossible that this should be divided. By a weak heart, therefore, cannot be meant a divided heart.
3. Not a wicked heart, in such a sense as to be the cause of wicked thoughts, volitions, emotions, or actions. This cannot be. A regenerate heart is a holy disposition, a holy, ruling preference of the will. It is impossible, therefore, that a regenerate heart should be a wicked heart, in such a sense as to be the cause of any sinful emotion or affection.
4. But by a weak heart is intended, that this ruling preference or disposition of the will has not, for the time being, and under the circumstances, such efficiency as successfully to resist temptation to specific sins. The regenerate heart is not the cause of the sin; but the sin is in spite of the regenerate heart. That is--temptation prevails, and occasions specific exercises of the will; not in accordance with the regenerate heart; but, in opposition to it. Just as a wife, who loves her husband with a supreme affection, may, by the force of temptation, be betrayed into an individual exercise or act that is inconsistent with the general state and supreme attitude of her will; and just as parents, who love their children with the most intense and absorbing affection, may, through the force of temptation, feel exceedingly provoked with them, and for

the time being, exercise feelings that are entirely in contrast with the state of their hearts toward their children. Every parent, and perhaps every husband and wife can testify, that such facts may exist, whatever their philosophical explanation may be.

III. Some things that are evidences of a weak heart.

1. When there is great constitutional susceptibility to temptation. When the heart, or ruling disposition, is vigorous and healthy, it is difficult to get the attention of the mind to those things that are inconsistent with it. Take, for example, the case of a young convert, who has been intemperate. While in the healthy exercise of his first love, he abhors the thoughts of his former companions, and will not allow the thought of ardent spirits to remain for a moment in his mind; but, should he leave his first love, the tendencies of his constitution would soon resume their control over him. He might then be unable to resist temptation to intemperance, if he should again come in contact with his old acquaintances, or within the smell of a bar-room. Just so a convert who has been licentious, in the healthy exercise of his first love, would so abhor his former ways, as not to suffer licentious thoughts to occupy his mind for a moment. A harlot might pass before him, at the very sight of whom his whole soul would recoil; and no other than feelings of the utmost disgust and loathing be excited. But should he leave his first love, his abused constitution would become so susceptible to the influence of temptation, as might very probably cause him to fall. Let it be understood, then, that when there is a great constitutional susceptibility, to temptation--when the attention of the mind is easily taken--when artificial or constitutional appetites and passions are easily awakened, and the mind easily thrown into a state of fermentation, in the presence of temptation, it is a sign of weakness of heart. The ruling disposition of the mind is not in a healthy and efficient state.

2. Another evidence of weakness of heart, is a want of firmness in the will, whenever a temptation is presented to the mind. When the heart is strong, or the ruling preference in a healthy state, temptation cannot prevail, because of the great and almost invincible firmness of the will. Thus, should a temptation to conjugal infidelity, be laid before a young bride, when in the healthy and energetic exercise of deep affection for her husband, she might sooner submit to be murdered, than consent to the embraces of another than her husband. But in the weakness of her heart, had she little or no affection for her husband, there might be such an utter want of firmness in her will, as greatly to expose her to seduction. Just so in the case of a young convert. In the healthy exercise of his first love, he might sooner suffer martyrdom than consent to sin. But should his heart become weak--should he leave his first love--no such firmness and stability of preference would remain, as to overcome and put down temptation. But on the contrary, whenever his emotions became excited, by the presence of some tempting object, he would find there were no firmness and strength of resolution in his will to resist temptation.

3. When a temptation is presented, and you find it difficult to resolve against indulgence, it is because of the weakness of your heart. Suppose a man who has been formerly intemperate, licentious or gluttonous, finds it, in the presence of temptation to the commission of any of these sins, difficult to resolve against indulgence. He may know, that if his heart is regenerate at all, it is in a state of extreme weakness. If, as a matter of fact, he does not find it easy promptly to resolve against indulgence, and to carry out this resolution in corresponding action, it is because of the weakness of his heart.

4. When you find it difficult to pray, honestly and earnestly, against a particular temptation, it is because of the weakness of your heart; that is--admitting that your heart has been regenerated. It must be owing either to the wickedness or weakness of the heart, and it may be consistent with either. If the heart has not been regenerated, it is wicked, and would, of course, prevent an honest and earnest appeal at the throne

of grace against temptation; but if it has been regenerated, and become weak, temptation may get such a hold of the mind as to render it difficult to pray with perfect honesty and great sincerity against a given temptation, under circumstances, of peculiar excitement.

5. When you find it difficult to divert attention from an object of temptation, it is because of the weakness of your heart. If the heart, or ruling disposition, is in a healthy or efficient state, the attention will be naturally and promptly diverted from a seductive object. But when you find it difficult to divert your attention, and find that, as a matter of fact, the object has got possession of your thoughts, and your excited feelings are clamoring for indulgence, there is great weakness of heart, and the most imminent peril. Escape for your life, or you fall.

6. When former resolutions are found to be of no avail in the presence of temptation, it is because of the weakness of the heart. No resolution can prevail to put down temptation, unless the resolution is supported at the time of the temptation by the healthy efficiency of the heart. If the resolution was made when the heart was strong and vigorous it will be of no avail, unless its foundation remain firm. Thus, a resolution, never to touch a drop of ardent spirits, might be made in the ardor of the young convert's first love; but should he leave his first love, his resolution would be as yielding as air, in the presence of temptation. When, therefore, you find that your resolutions, to resist sin, obey God, and lead a holy life, are of no avail, in the presence of temptation, it is certain, either that your heart has never been regenerated, or that at present it has no efficiency, and is extremely weak.

7. When temptation easily excites anger, ambition, envy, pride, vanity, lust, or any other unhallowed emotion or affection, it is certain, either that the heart has never been regenerated, or that it is extremely weak.

8. When, in the presence of temptation, and under the force of excited feeling, the soul loses an apprehension of the guilt and ill-desert of that sin to which it is tempted, the heart has either never been regenerated, or it is extremely weak. If, when the passions become excited, or the appetite for food, in the presence of some tempting dish, the mind finds it difficult to realize the great guilt of gluttony, or the indulgence of passion, the heart must be either wholly unregenerate, or in a state of great weakness.

IV. Causes of weakness of heart.

1. Ignorance. Of course the stability of any preference, its efficiency, must depend, in a great measure, upon the reasons that are before the mind for the exercise of such a state of will. Without the true knowledge of God there can be no true love to Him. And our love to Him can never exceed our knowledge of Him. Our estimate of spiritual and divine things must depend upon our knowledge of them. Where, therefore, there is great ignorance of God and of divine things, there will be of course a proportionate instability, and want of efficiency in the ruling preference or heart.

2. Unbelief is another fruitful source of weakness of heart. God and the things of God are realities only to our minds in proportion to our faith. And it is unreasonable to expect any efficiency in the ruling preference or heart, unless faith is active, and eternal things appear as realities to the mind.

3. The state of the physical system may be and often is a cause of great weakness of heart. Ill health in general, may be expected to render the actions of the mind feeble. But especially diseases of the brain, spinal marrow, or diseases located in, or sensibly affecting any of those organs that strongly sympathize with the brain, will of course greatly disturb the healthy action of the mind, and not unfrequently render the

heart, or ruling preference, extremely weak.

4. All improper indulgences weaken the heart, just as they weaken the conscience. Every one knows, that to persist in any thing to which the conscience is opposed, gradually weakens, until it not unfrequently, either entirely, or in a great measure, suspends the action of conscience, in respect to particular things. In like manner, any improper indulgence of appetite, passion, or the indulgence of any unlawful exercise of mind whatever, weakens the heart or the influence of the ruling disposition or preference of the mind.

V. The remedy for weakness of heart.

Wait on the Lord. Ps. 27:14: "Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord." Isa. 40:31: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint." In these passages, the remedy for a weak heart is explicitly pointed out by God Himself. But here it should be inquired, what is implied in "waiting upon the Lord?" I answer:

1. It does not imply sitting still in apathy, and leaving God to strengthen our heart in his own time and way, irrespective of our own exertions. Many persons seem to think themselves waiting upon the Lord, when they give themselves up to float on upon the stream of life, without at all concerning themselves whether they are holy or sinful, while they profess to be waiting God's time.

2. Waiting upon the Lord does not imply a self-righteous betaking ourselves to prayer, and the use of means, with the expectation that we shall in this way recommend ourselves to God. But--

3. Waiting upon the Lord does imply, giving ourselves up to prayer--a waiting in the constant attitude of prayer and supplication before God.

4. It implies perseverance in prayer, and in the use of all the means of knowledge and grace, that are essential to strengthening our hearts.

5. It implies repentance and putting away our sins.

6. It implies confession and restitution in all cases of wrong.

7. It implies great fervency of importunity.

8. It implies faith in the promises of God.

9. It implies submission to the wisdom and will of God, in respect to the time and manner of conferring the blessing upon us.

10. It implies a willingness on our part, to have Him make use of any means which He sees to be necessary to strengthen our hearts--a willingness to have Him take away our idols, property, friends, health, life, or any thing that is necessary to strengthen our hearts and make us holy.

VI. What is implied in strengthening the heart.

1. An increase of knowledge. In order to strengthen our hearts, we need to know and thoroughly to consider those things which are calculated to wean us from sin, and to strengthen our preference and purpose in the divine life.

2. It implies an increase of faith. Strengthening the heart must necessarily depend upon an increase of faith. For faith is always the condition of true love to God and stability in his service. It is certainly impossible, that the mind should be brought under the influence of divine considerations, any farther than they are believed.

3. It implies an increase of love. Supreme love and supreme preference, are the same thing.--Therefore, strengthening the heart, of course, is an increase of love to God and divine things.

4. It implies such an absorption of the mind in God, as to break the power of temptation. I say, to break the power of temptation. What power could temptation have over a man, if he stood at the solemn Judgment, or saw himself to be standing out in the broad sun-light of God's countenance? In such circumstances, temptation would pass by him like the idle wind.

5. It implies such a swallowing up of the attention and affections in God, as in a great measure to prevent the soul from being tempted. By this I do not mean, that the mind cannot, in such circumstances be tempted; but that it is much more difficult for temptation at all to gain the attention of the mind, or disturb it in the least degree. Temptation implies, of course, that to some extent, the mind is brought to attend to the temptation. When, therefore, the attention is so fixed and riveted, when the heart is so enlarged and strengthened, as that the whole soul is swallowed up in God, that soul may say, as Christ did, "The prince of this world cometh but hath nothing in me;" no unsubdued lust, passion, or appetite remains, upon which to fasten a temptation.

REMARKS.

1. A great many persons have a very weak heart, who are not at all aware of it; because they make very little or no effort to resist sin. Making no effort to resist, they of course do not know how weak they would find themselves, should they attempt to resist. They are literally "led captive by Satan at his will," and of course have no idea of the weakness of their hearts.

2. Many are sensible of their weakness, but make no other than legal efforts to escape. They are trying to resist sin by resolutions and promises, and struggling in their own strength. They do not seem to know, that unless their heart is strengthened all their resolutions, founded upon legal considerations, will be of course as yielding as air. They are convicted of sin, distressed, ashamed, and agonized--sometimes almost despairing, and then encouraging themselves, and resolving, and renewing their resolutions, and binding themselves by oaths and promises, the most solemn; but all to no purpose; for they are not supported by the active exercise of supreme love to God. Their flesh will therefore, of course, be too strong for resolutions not founded in deep affection for God.

3. Others, still, err, by going to the opposite extreme. They make no dependence upon legal efforts, nor indeed do they make any efforts at all; but in Antinomian security, settle down in an apathy which they call peace, and thus tempt Christ. They call that faith which presumptuously throws the responsibility of keeping them, upon Christ, in such a sense as to exclude the active exercise of their own agency.

4. The providence of God is designed to develop the weakness of the hearts of his people, and make them see how much they are dependent upon his grace to strengthen them. It often comes to pass, that individuals suppose their sins are dead, and that they have really overcome for ever certain temptations; and, in this state they are apt to forget, that the ruling efficiency of their former habits of mind is suspended only by the continual agency and grace of God. Now if you forget, that your sins are kept under only by the

continual agency of God, his providence will soon develop your weakness, and teach you, doubtless to your sorrow and confusion of face, that your enemies are not dead, but only kept from having dominion over you, by the constant presence and agency of the Holy Spirit.

5. From this subject we can see why Paul took pleasure in infirmities. It was, that the power of Christ might rest upon him. 2 Cor. 12:7-10: "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong." Here Paul found, as a matter of fact, that his infirmities, that is, his weaknesses, emptied him of self-dependence, and this led him to put Christ in place of his resolutions. So that, instead of depending upon his legal efforts and resolutions, he depended on Christ.

6. You see what entire and permanent sanctification is. It consists in such a strength of heart, as will resist all temptation to sin.

7. Those who have a wicked heart are not born again. A weak heart is not a wicked heart, as I have already said, in such a sense as to be the cause of wicked thoughts, emotions, and actions.

8. A strong heart, and a clean heart, are synonymous[sic.] terms.

9. Whenever the heart is weak, the cause of this weakness, whatever it is, must, if possible, be put away. Sometimes the cause is physical. It lies in the indulgence of appetite or passion. Sometimes in such a state of the body as to render the healthy operations of the mind impossible. Therefore, in waiting upon the Lord, to renew our strength, we must strive to do all that in us lies, to put away the cause of the weakness of our heart.

10. Whenever we have done this, and are waiting upon the Lord according to his directions, we are bound to exercise the most unwavering confidence, that He will strengthen our hearts. "Wait then, I say, on the Lord."

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