

Where Sin Occurs God Cannot Wisely Prevent It

by Charles Finney

The sermon explores the idea that sin is impossible to prevent under God's government, and that God's infinite goodness and wisdom enjoin it upon us to pray for the prevention of sin.

Scripture: Isaiah 5:4, Luke 17:1, Romans 14:12, James 1:14

Topics: "Sin and Responsibility", "God's Moral Government"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that while sin is an unavoidable reality under God's moral government, it remains inexcusable for the sinner. He explains that God's governance is based on moral persuasion rather than coercion, allowing individuals the freedom to choose sin despite the weight of moral motives against it. Finney argues that God's wisdom and goodness ensure that He does all He can to prevent sin without compromising His nature, and that ultimately, the responsibility for sin lies with the individual. He concludes by urging listeners to recognize their moral agency and the importance of aligning their hearts with their conscience in order to find peace with God.

Transcript

"It is impossible but that offences come; but woe unto him through whom they come!" -- Luke xvii. 1.

AN "offence" as used in this passage, is an occasion of falling into sin. It is anything which causes another to sin and fall.

It is plain that the author of the offence is in this passage conceived of as voluntary and as sinful in his act; else the woe of God would not be denounced upon him.

Consequently the passage assumes that this sin is in some sense necessary and unavoidable. What is true of this sin in this respect is true of all other sin. Indeed any sin may become an offence in the sense of a temptation to others to sin, and therefore its necessity and unavoidableness would then be affirmed by this text.

The doctrine of this text, therefore, is that sin, under the government of God, can not be prevented. I purpose to examine this doctrine; to show that, nevertheless, sin is utterly inexcusable as to the sinner; then answer some objections, and conclude with remarks.

1. When we say it is impossible to prevent sin under the government of God, the statement still calls for another inquiry, viz.: Where does this impossibility lie? Is it on the part of the sinner, or on the part of God? Which is true; that the sinner can not possibly forbear to sin, or that God can not prevent his sinning?

The first supposition answers itself, for it could not be sin if it were utterly unavoidable. It might be his misfortune; but nothing could be more unjust than to impute it to him as his crime.

But we shall better understand where this impossibility does and must lie, if we first recall to mind some of the elementary principles of God's government.

Let us, then, consider that God's government over men is moral, and known to be such by every intelligent being. By the term moral, I mean that it governs by motives, and does not move by physical force. It adapts itself to mind, not to matter. It contemplates mind as having intellect to understand truth, sensibility to appreciate its bearing upon happiness, conscience to judge of the right, and a will to determine a course of voluntary action in view of God's claims. So God governs mind. Not so does He govern matter. The planetary worlds are controlled by quite a different sort of agency. God does not move them in their orbits by motives, but by a physical agency.

I said, all men know this government to be moral by their own consciousness. When its precepts and its penalties come before their minds, they are conscious that an appeal is made to their voluntary powers. They are never conscious of any physical agency coercing obedience.

God's government implies in man the power to will, or not to will; to will right, or to will wrong: to choose or to refuse the great good which Jehovah promises. It also implies intelligence. The beings to whom law is addressed are capable of understanding it. They have also, as I have said, a conscience, by which they can appreciate and must affirm its obligations.

You need to distinguish broadly between the influence of motive on mind and of mechanical force upon matter. The former implies voluntariness; the latter does not. The former is adapted to mind and has no adaptation to matter; the latter equally is adapted to matter, but has no possible application to mind. In God's government over the human mind, all is voluntary; nothing is coerced as by physical force. Indeed, it is impossible that physical force should directly influence mind. Compulsion is precluded by the very nature of moral agency. Where compulsion begins, moral agency ends. If it were possible for God to force the will as He forces the moon along in her orbit, to do so would subvert the very idea of a moral government. Neither praise nor blame could attach to any actions of beings, so moved. Persuasion, brought to bear upon mind, is always such in its nature that it can be resisted. By the very nature of the case, God's creatures must have power to resist any amount of even His persuasion. There can be no power in heaven or earth to coerce the will, as matter is coerced. The nature of mind forbids its possibility. And if it were possible, it would still be true that in just so far as God should coerce the human will, He would cease to govern morally.

God is infinitely wise. Men can no more doubt this than they can doubt their own existence. He has infinite knowledge. He knows everything i.e., all objects of knowledge; and knows them all perfectly. He is also infinitely good, His will being always conformed to His perfect knowledge and always controlled by infinite benevolence.

His infinite goodness implies that He does the best He can, always, and everywhere. In no instance does He ever fail to do the very best He can do, so that He can appeal to every creature and say -- What more

can I do to prevent sin than I am doing? Indeed, He does so appeal to every intelligent mind. He made this appeal through Isaiah to the ancient Jews, "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?"

Every moral agent in the universe knows that God has done the best He could do in regard to sin. Do not you know this, each one of you? Certainly you do. He Himself, in all His infinite wisdom, could not suggest a better course than that which He has taken. Men know this truth so well, they never can know it better. You may at some future day realize it more fully when you shall come to see its millions of illustrations drawn out before your eyes; but no demonstration can make its proof more perfect than it is to your own minds today.

Now sin does, in fact, exist under God's government. For this sin, God either is or is not to blame. Every man knows that God is not to blame for this sin, for man's own nature affirms that He would prevent it if He wisely could. Certainly if He was able wisely to prevent sin in any case where it actually occurs, then not to do so nullifies all our conceptions of His goodness and wisdom. He would be the greatest sinner in the universe if, with power and wisdom adequate to the prevention of sin, He had failed to prevent it.

Let me here note, also, that what God can not do wisely, He can not (speaking morally) do at all. For He can not act unwisely. He can not do things which wisdom forbids. To do so would be to undeify Himself. The supposition would make Him cease to be perfect, and this were equivalent to ceasing to be God.

Or thus: If He were to interpose unwisely to prevent a sinner from sinning, He would sin Himself. I speak now of each instance in which God does not, in fact, interpose to prevent sin. In any of these cases, if He were to interpose unwisely to prevent sin, He would prevent a man from sinning at the expense of sinning Himself. Here, then, is the case. A sinner is about to fall before temptation, or in more correct language, is about to rush into some new sin. God cannot wisely prevent his doing so. Now what shall be done? Shall He let that sinner rush on to his chosen sin and self-wrought ruin; or shall He step forward, unwisely, sin Himself, and incur all the frightful consequences of such a step? He lets the sinner bear his own responsibility. Why should not He? Who would wish to have God sin?

This is a full explanation of every case in which man does in fact sin and God does not prevent it.

And this is not conjecture, but is logical certainly. No truth can be more irresistibly and necessarily certain than this. I once heard a minister say in a sermon, "It is not irrational to suppose that in each case of sin, it occurs as it does because God can not prevent it." After he retired from the pulpit, I said to him -- Why did you leave the matter so? You left your hearers to infer that perhaps it might be in some other way; that this was only a possible theory, yet that some other theory was perhaps even more probable. Why did you not say, This theory is certain and must necessarily be true?

Thus the impossibility of preventing sin lies not in the sinner, but wholly with God. Sin, it should be remembered, is nothing else than an act of free will, always committed against one's conviction of right. Indeed, if a man did not know that selfishness is sin, it would not be sin in his case.

Once more, sin is always committed against and in despite of motives of infinitely greater weight than those which induce to sin. The very fact that his conscience condemns the sin is his own judgment on the question, proving that in his own view the motives to sin are infinitely contemptible when put in the scale to measure those against the sin in question. Every sinner knows that sin is a willful abuse of his own powers

as a moral agent -- of those noblest powers of his being in view of which he is especially said to be made in the image of God. Made like God with these exalted attributes, capable of determining his own voluntary activities intelligently if he will; in accordance with his reason and his conscience if he will; he yet in every act of sin abuses and degrades these powers, tramples down in the very dust the image of God enstamped on his being, and with the capacities of becoming an angel, makes himself a fool. Clothed with a dignity of nature akin to that of his Maker, he chooses to debase himself to the level of brutes and of devils. With a face naturally looking upwards; with an intelligence that grasps the great truths of God; with a reason that postulates and affirms the great necessary principles involved in his moral duties and relations; with capacities which fit him to sit on a nation's throne; he yet says -- Let me take this glorious image of God and debase it in the dust! Let me cast myself down, till there shall be no lower depth of degradation to which I can sink!

Sin is in every instance a dishonoring of God. This every sinner must know. It casts off His authority, spurns His advice, maltreats His love. Truly does God Himself say, "A son honoreth his father and a servant his master; if then I be a father, where is mine honor? and if I be a master, where is my fear?"

What sinner ever supposed that God neglects to do anything He wisely can do to prevent sin? If this be not true, what is conscience but a lie and a delusion? Conscience always affirms that God is clear of all guilt in reference to sin. In every instance in which conscience condemns the sinner, it necessarily must, and actually does, fully acquit God.

These remarks will suffice to show that sin in every instance of its commission is utterly inexcusable.

We are next to notice some objections.

1. "If God is infinitely wise and good, why need we pray at all? If He will surely do the best possible thing always and all the good He can do, why need we pray?"

I answer. Because His infinite goodness and wisdom enjoin it upon us. Who could ask a better reason than this? If you believe in His infinite wisdom and goodness, and make this belief the basis of your objection, you will certainly, if honest, be satisfied with this answer.

But again I answer. It might be wise and good for Him to do many things if sought unto in prayer, which He could not wisely do, unasked. You can not, therefore, infer that prayer never changes the course which God voluntarily pursues.

2. Objecting again, you ask why we should pray to God to prevent sin, if He can not prevent it? If under the circumstances in which sin exists, God can not, as you hold, prevent sin, why go to Him and pray Him to prevent it?

I answer. We pray for the very purpose of changing the circumstances. This is our object. And prayer does change the circumstances. If we step forward and offer fervent, effectual prayer, this quite changes the state of the case. Look at Moses pleading with God to spare the nation after their great sin in the matter of the golden calf. God said to him, "Let me alone that I may destroy them, and I will make of thee a great nation." Nay, said Moses, for what will the Egyptians say? And what will all the nations say? They have long time said, The God of that people will not be able to get them through that vast wilderness; now therefore, what will thou do for Thy great name? "Yet now, if Thou wilt, forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written."

This prayer, coming up before God, greatly changed the circumstances of the case. For this prayer, God could honorably spare the nation -- it was so honorable for Him to answer this prayer.

3. Yet further objecting, you ask, "Why did God create moral agents at all if He foresaw that He could not prevent their sinning?"

I answer. Because He saw that on the whole it was better to do so. He could prevent some sin in this race of moral agents; could overrule what He could not wisely prevent, so as to bring out from it a great deal of good, and so that in the long run, He saw it better, with all the results before Him, to create than to forbear; therefore, wisdom and love made it necessary that He should create. Having the power to create a race of moral beings -- having also power to convert and save a vast multitude of them, and power also to overrule the sin He should not prevent so that it should evolve immense good, how could He forbear to create as He did?

4. But if God can not prevent sin, will He not be unhappy?

No; He is entirely satisfied to do the best He can, and accept the results.

5. But some will say -- Is not this "limiting the Holy One of Israel?" No. It is no proper limitation of God's power to say that He can not do anything that is unwise. Nor do we limit His power when we say -- He can not move mind just as He moves a planet. That is no proper subject of power which is in its own nature absurd and impossible.

Yet these are the only directions in which we have spoken of any limitations to His power.

But you say, Could not God prevent sin by annihilating each moral agent the instant before he would sin? Doubtless He could; but we say if this were wise He would have done it. He has not done it, certainly not in all cases, and therefore it is not always wise.

But you say, Let Him give more of His Holy Spirit. I answer, He does give all He can wisely, under existing circumstances. To suppose He might give more than He does, circumstances being the same, is to impeach His wisdom or His goodness.

Some people seem greatly horrified at the idea of setting limits to God's power. Yet they make assumptions which inevitably impeach His wisdom and His goodness. Such persons need to consider that if we must choose between limiting His power on the one hand, or His wisdom and His love on the other, it is infinitely more honorable to Him to adopt the former alternative than the latter. To strike a blow at His moral attributes, is to annihilate His throne. And further, let it be also considered, as we have already suggested, that you do not in any offensive sense limit His power when you assume that He can not do things naturally impossible, and can not act unwisely.

Let these remarks suffice in the line of answer to objections I know that you who are students will say that this must be true. You are accustomed to notice the action of your own moral powers. You have a moral sense, and it has been in some good degree developed. You know it is utterly impossible that God should act unwisely. You know He must act benevolently, always doing the best thing He can do. He has given you a nature which affirms, postulates, intuitively these truths. Else there could be no conscience. The presence and action of a conscience implies that these great truths respecting the moral nature of God are indisputably affirmed in your soul by your own moral nature.

I address you, therefore, as those who have a conscience. Suppose it were otherwise. Suppose all that we call conscience -- the entire moral side of your nature -- should suddenly drop out, and I should find myself speaking to a shoal of moral idiots -- beings utterly void of a conscience! How desolate the scene! But I am not speaking to such an audience. Therefore I am sure that you will understand and appreciate what I say.

REMARKS.

1. We may see the only sense in which God could have purposed the existence of sin. It is simply negative. He purposed not to prevent it in any case where it does actually occur. He does not purpose to make moral agents sin; not, for example, Adam and Eve in the garden, or Judas in the matter of betraying Christ. All He purposed to do Himself was to leave them with only a certain amount of restraint -- as much as He could wisely impose; and then if they would sin, let them bear the responsibility. He left them to act freely and did not positively prevent their sinning. He never uses means to make men sin. He only forbears to use unwise means to prevent their sinning. Thus His agency in the existence of sin is only negative.

2. The existence of sin does not prove that it is the necessary means of the greatest good. Some of you are aware that this point has been often mooted in theological discussions.

I do not purpose now to go into it at length, but will only say that in all cases wherein men sin, they might obey God instead of sinning. Now the question here is -- If they were to obey rather than sin, would not a greater good accrue? We have these two reasons for the affirmative: (1), that by natural tendency, obedience promotes good and disobedience evil: and (2), that in all those cases, God earnestly and positively enjoins obedience. It is fair to presume that He would enjoin that which would secure the greatest good.

3. The human conscience always justifies God. This is an undeniable fact -- a fact of universal consciousness. The proof of it can never be made stronger, for it stands recorded in each man's bosom.

Yet a very remarkable book has recently appeared, "The Conflict of Ages" -- which is obviously built upon the opposite assumption, viz., that the human conscience does not unqualifiedly condemn man; but except under the light of this peculiar theory, does in fact condemn God. This theory, adopted professedly to vindicate God as against the human conscience, holds that there was a pre-existent state in which we all lived and sinned, and there forfeited our title to a moral nature, unbiased toward sinning. There we had a fair probation. Here, if we suppose this to be the commencement of our moral agency, we do not have a fair probation, and conscience therefore does not, and in truth can not, justify God except on the supposition of a pre-existent state.

The entire book, therefore, is built on the assumption of a conflict between the human conscience and God. A shocking assumption! A brother remarked to me of this that it seemed to him to be the most outrageous and blasphemous indictment against God that could be drawn. Yet the author intended no such thing. He is undoubtedly a good man, but, in this particular, egregiously mistaken.

The fact is, conscience does always condemn the sinner and justify God. It could not affirm obligation without justifying God. The real controversy, therefore, is not between God and the conscience, but between God and the heart. In every instance in which sin exists, conscience condemns the sinner and justifies God. This of itself is a perfect and sufficient answer to the whole doctrine of that book. It knocks

out the only and whole foundation on which it is built. If that book be true, men never should have had a conscience until that book was published, read, understood, and believed. No man should ever have been convicted of sin until he came to see that he had existed in a previous state and began his sinning there.

Yet the facts are right over against this. Everywhere in all ages, with no deference to this book, and no disposition to wait for its tardy developments -- everywhere and through all time the human conscience has stood up to condemn each sinner and compel him to sign his own death-warrant; and acquit his Maker of all blame. These are the facts of human nature and life.

4. Conversion consists precisely in this: the heart's consent to these decisions of the conscience. It is for the heart to come over to the ground occupied by the conscience, and thoroughly acquiesce in it as right and true. Conscience has a long time been speaking; it has always held one doctrine, and has long been resisted by the heart. Now, in conversion, the heart comes over, and gives in its full assent to the decisions of conscience; that God is right, and that sin and himself a sinner are utterly wrong.

And now do any of you want to know how you may become a Christian? This is it. Let your heart justify God and condemn sin, even as your conscience does. Let your voluntary powers yield to the necessary affirmations of your reason and conscience. Then all will be peaceful within because all will be right.

But you say, I am trying to do this! Ah, I know it to be the case with some of you that you are trying to resist to your utmost. You settle down, as it were, with your whole weight while God would fain draw you by His truth and Spirit. Yet you fancy you are really trying to yield your heart to God. A most unaccountable delusion!

5. In the light of this subject we can see the reason for a general judgment. God intends to clear Himself from all imputation of wrong in the matter of sin before the entire moral universe. Strange facts have transpired in His universe, and strange insinuations have been made against His course. These matters must all be set right. For this He will take time enough. He will wait till all things are ready. Obviously He could not bring out His great trial-day till the deeds of earth have all been wrought -- till all the events of this wondrous drama have had their full development. Until then He will not be ready to make a full exposé of all His doings. Then He can and will do it most triumphantly and gloriously.

The revelations of that day will doubtless show why God did not interpose to prevent every sin in the universe. Then He will satisfy us as to the reasons He had for suffering Adam and Eve to sin and for leaving Judas to betray his Master. We know now that He is wise and good, although we do not know all the particular reasons for His conduct in the permission of sin. Then He will reveal those particular reasons, as far as it may be best and possible. No doubt He will then show that His reasons were so wise and good that He could not have done better.

6. Sin will then appear infinitely inexcusable and odious. It will then be seen in its true relations toward God and His intelligent creatures, inexpressibly blameworthy and guilty.

Take a case. Suppose a son has gone far away from the paths of obedience and virtue. He has had one of the best of fathers, but he would not hear his counsels. He had a wise and affectionate mother, but he sternly resisted all the appeals of her tenderness and tears. Despite of the most watchful care of parents and friends, he would go astray. As one madly bent on self-ruin, he pushed on, reckless of the sorrow and grief he brought upon those he should have honored and loved. At last the issues of such a course stand revealed. The guilty youth finds himself ruined in constitution, in fortune, and in good name. He has sunk

far too low to retain even self-respect. Nothing remains for him but agonizing reflections on past folly and guilt. Hear him bewail his own infatuation. "Alas," he cries, "I have almost killed my venerable father, and long ago I had quite broken my mother's heart. All that folly and crime in a son could do, I have done to bring down their gray hairs with sorrow to the grave. No wonder that having done so much to ruin my best friends, I have plucked down a double ruin on my own head. No sinner ever more richly deserved to be doubly damned than myself."

Thus truth flashes upon his soul and thus his heart quails and his conscience thunders condemnation. So it must be with every sinner when all his sins against God shall stand revealed before his eyes, and there shall be nothing left for him but intense and unqualified self-condemnation.

7. God's omnipotence is no guaranty to any man that either himself or any other sinner will be saved. I know the Universalist affirms it to be. He will ask -- Does not the fact of God's omnipotence, taken in connection with His infinite love, prove that all men will be saved? I answer, No! It does not prove that God will save one soul. With ever so much proof of God's perfect wisdom, love, and power we could not infer that He would save even one sinner. We might just as reasonably infer that He would send the whole race to hell. How could we know what His wisdom would determine? How could we infer what the exigencies of His government might demand? In fact, the only ground we have for the belief that He will save any sinner is not at all our inference from His wisdom, love, and power; but is wholly and only His own declarations as to this matter. Our knowledge is wholly from revelation. God has said so; and this is all we know about it.

Yet further I reply to the Universalist, that God's omnipotence saves nobody. Salvation is not wrought by physical omnipotence. It is only by moral power that God saves, and this can save no man unless he consents to be saved.

8. How bitter the reflections which sinners must have on their death-bed, and how fearfully agonizing when they pass behind the veil and see things in their true light. Did you ever think when you have seen a sinner dying in his sins what an awful thing it is for a sinner to die? You mark the lines of anguish on his countenance; you see the look of despair; you observe he can not bear to hear the word of the awful future. There he lies, and death pushes on his stern assault. The poor victim struggles in vain against his dreaded foe. He sinks, and sinks, his pulse runs lower, and yet lower; look in his glassy eye; mark that haggard brow; there, he breathes not; but all suddenly he stares as one affrighted; throws up his hands wildly, screams frightfully; sinks down and is gone to return no more! And where is he now? Not beyond the scope of thought and reflection. He can see back into the world he has left. Still he can think. Alas, his misery is that he can do nothing but think! As said the prisoner in his solitary cell: I could bear torture or I could endure toil; but O, to have nothing to do but to think! To hear the voice of friend no more -- to say not a word -- to do nothing from day to day and from year to year but to think! that is awful. So of the lost sinner. Who can measure the misery of incessant self-agonizing thought? Now, when at any time your reflections press uncomfortably and you feel that you shall almost go deranged, you can find some drop of comfort for your fevered lips; you can for a few moments, at least, fall asleep, and so forget your sorrows and find a transient rest; but oh! when you shall reach the world where the wicked find no rest -- where there can be no sleep -- where not one drop of water can reach you to cool your tongue. Alas, how can your heart endure or your hands be strong in that dread hour! God tried in vain to bless and save you. You fought Him back and plucked down on your guilty head a fearful damnation!

9. What infinite consolation will remain to God after He shall have closed up the entire scenes of earth! He has banished the wicked and taken home the righteous to His bosom of love and peace. I have done,

says He, all I wisely could to save the race of man. I made sacrifices cheerfully; sent my well-beloved Son gladly; waited as long as it seemed wise to wait, and now it only remains to overrule all this pain and woe for the utmost good, and rejoice in the bliss of the redeemed forevermore.

There are the guilty lost. Their groans swell out and echo up the walls of their pit of woe; it is to so much evidence that God is good and wise and will surely sustain His throne in equity and righteousness forever. It teaches most impressive lessons upon the awful doom of sin. There let it stand and bear its testimony, to warn other beings against a course so guilty and a doom so dreadful!

There, in that world of woe, may be some of our pupils possibly some of our own children. But God is just and His throne stainless of their blood. It shall not mar the eternal joy of His kingdom, that they would pull down such damnation on their heads. They insisted they would take the responsibility, and now they have it.

Sinner, do you not care for this today? Will you come to the inquiry meeting this evening to trifle about your salvation? I can tell you where you will not trifle. When the great bell of time shall toll the death-knell of earth and call her millions of sons and daughters to the final judgment, you will not be in a mood to trifle! You will surely be there! It will be a time for serious thought -- an awful time of dread. Are you ready to face its revelations and decisions?

Or do you say, Enough, ENOUGH! I have long enough withstood His grace and spurned His love; I will now give, my heart to God, to be His only, forevermore?

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