

Who Are We Trying to Fool?

by Charles Finney

True Christianity consists in obedience, and faith must be an efficient, moving faith that produces good works.

Scripture: James 1:22-23

Topics: "Self-Deception", "True Faith in Action"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the danger of self-deception among Christians who hear the Word but fail to act on it, distinguishing between two types of hypocrites: those who deceive others and those who deceive themselves. He argues that true saving faith requires not just intellectual agreement with the truth but a corresponding change in conduct, as faith must be active and produce good works. Finney warns that many professing Christians may enjoy sound doctrine without allowing it to influence their lives, leading to a false sense of piety. He calls for a Christianity that is rooted in obedience and practical application of the Word, urging believers to examine their lives for genuine faith. Ultimately, he stresses that true faith is evidenced by a transformed life that reflects obedience to God's commands.

Transcript

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves"--James 1:22

Anyone who does not practice what he admits to be true is self-deceived.

Two classes of hypocrites exist among professing Christians--those that deceive others and those that deceive themselves. One class of hypocrites has a deceptive show of religion, cover up the enmity of their hearts against God, and lead others to think they are very pious people. Thus the Pharisees obtained the reputation of being remarkably pious by their show of religion, their alms, and their long prayers.

The other class does not deceive others but themselves. Their religion consists of a parcel of notions without regard to practice, and they deceive themselves to think they are good Christians. But they are destitute of true holiness. They are hearers of the Word but not doers. They love orthodox preaching and take great pleasure in hearing abstract doctrines exhibited. With imagination and glowing feeling, they view the character and government of God; but they are not careful to practice the precepts of God's Word.

It is highly probable that a number of readers are of this character. I do not know your names, but I want you to understand that if you are of this character, you are the person I am speaking to. I mean you. You

hear the Word and believe it in theory, while you deny it in practice. You deceive yourselves. The Scripture proves it. Here you have an express "Thus saith the Lord" that all hearers are not doers and are self-deceivers.

TRUE SAVING FAITH

In the first place, you hear the Word and admit it to be true, but you do not truly believe it. Two things are necessary for evangelical or saving faith. The first is intellectual conviction after hearing truth. I do not mean merely the abstract truth but its bearing on you. The truth, in its relation to you, or its bearing on your conduct, must be received intellectually. True faith includes a corresponding change of heart. When a man's mind is convinced, and he admits the truth in relation to himself, then there must be an application of it to himself. Both these states of mind are indispensable to true faith.

Intellectual conviction of the truth is not saving faith. But intellectual conviction, accompanied by a change of the affections, is saving faith. Therefore, true saving faith always brings a change in conduct. Just as certain as the will controls the conduct, men will act as they believe. Suppose I say to a man, "Do you believe this?" "Yes, I believe it." What does he mean--a mere intellectual conviction? He may have that but not have faith.

A man may even approve or agree with abstract truth. Many persons suppose faith is applauding for the character and government of God and the plan of salvation. They view it, however, abstractedly. When they hear an eloquent sermon on the attributes or government of God, they are excited about the glory and excellency displayed. They do not have a particle of true faith. The rational mind is so formed that it naturally approves of truth when viewed abstractedly.

The most wicked devils in hell love it, as long as they do not see it in relation to themselves. If the gospel did not interfere with their own selfishness, they would not only see it as true but would heartily approve it. The reason why wicked men and devils hate God is because they see Him in relation to themselves. Their hearts rise up in rebellion because they see Him opposed to their selfishness.

This is the source of a grand delusion among men in regard to Christianity. They see it as truth, and they rejoice in contemplating it. They do not apply it to themselves, and so they love to hear such preaching and say they are fed by it. But they go away and do not practice it!

Imagine a man who is sick, and his feelings are tender. In view of Christ as a kind and tender Savior, his heart melts, and he feels strong emotions towards Jesus Christ. Why? For the very same reason that he would feel strong emotions towards the hero of a romance. But he does not obey Christ. He never practices one thing out of obedience to Christ but views Him abstractedly and is delighted with His glorious and lovely character. He himself remains in the gall of bitterness. Faith must be an efficient, moving faith that produces good works, or it is not the faith of the gospel and is no real faith at all

DOERS OF THE WORD

True Christianity consists in obedience. However much you may approve of Christianity, you have no faith unless you obey it. In saying that true faith consists in obedience, I do not mean outward obedience. But faith itself, true faith, works by love and produces action. There is no real obedience but the obedience of the heart. Love fulfills the law, and Christianity consists in the obedience of the heart with a corresponding change of life.

The man who hears the truth and approves it but does not practice it deceives himself. He is like the man beholding his natural face in a glass--he sees himself, goes his way, and immediately forgets what he looks like. (See James 1:23-24)

The state of mind that you mistake for Christianity--an intellectual conviction of truth and approval of it in the abstract--is as common to the wicked as to the good. This is why it is so difficult to convince sinners that they are opposed to God and His truth. Men are created so that they do approve of virtue and admire the character and government of God. They would approve and admire every truth in the Bible, if they could view it abstractedly and without any application to themselves. They can sit for years under preaching that holds up the truth in such a way that it has no practical bearing on themselves. Then they will never consider that they are opposed to God and to His government.

I am persuaded that great multitudes of unconverted souls can be found in all congregations where the abstract doctrines are preached. No doubt many come to church because they love orthodox preaching. But after all this preaching, still they are not doers of the Word. And here is the difficulty: they have not had that searching preaching that made them see the truth in its bearing on themselves.

Now that they are in the Church, whenever the truth is preached in its practical relation to them, they show that their hearts are unchanged by opposing the truth.

They took it for granted that they were Christians and joined a church to hear sound doctrinal preaching. They read the Bible and approve of it. If their faith is not practical enough to influence their conduct, or if they do not view the truth in relation to their own practice, then their faith does not affect them as much as the faith of the devil. (See James 2:19)

Great injury has been done by false representation of the wickedness of real Christians. Many impressions suggest that real Christians are the most wicked beings on the face of the earth. When they sin, they incur great guilt. For a Christian to sin is highly criminal. Enlightened Christians see great wickedness in their sins. When they compare their obligations with their lives, they are greatly humbled and express their humility in very strong language.

But it is not true that they are as bad as the devil or anywhere in the neighborhood of it. When they do sin, their sins have great aggravation and appear extremely wicked in the sight of God. But to suppose that men are true Christians while they live in the service of the devil is not only false but very dangerous.

HERETICS AND PHARISEES

The truth is that those who do not obey God are not Christians. The contrary doctrine is ruinous to the churches, filling them with multitudes whose claim to piety depends on their adoption of certain notions, while they never truly intended to obey the requirements of the gospel in their lives.

Professing Christians who never like to hear about God or His attributes but lay all stress on religious practice to the exclusion of Christian doctrines are Pharisees. They practice outward piety but will not receive the great truths that relate to God, and they deny the fundamental doctrines of the gospel.

Wherever you find a man's practice heretical, you may be sure his belief is heretical too. The faith that he hides in his heart is just as heretical as his life. He may not be heretical in his notions and theories. He may be right there, even on the very point where he is heretical in his practice. But he does not really believe it. For example, if you ask a careless sinner if he expects to die, he will reply, "Oh, yes, I know I

must die; all men are mortal." As soon as he thinks about it, he assents to the truth. And if you could fasten the conviction of his mind until he is really and permanently impressed with it, he would undoubtedly change his conduct and live for another world instead of this one. But he does not really believe he is going to die, and he continues grasping for wealth. A man's belief controls his practice, just as his will governs his conduct.

The Church has for too long been concerned with abstract doctrines and left the more practical out of view. Look at the creeds of the Church and see how the main emphasis lies on those doctrines that have little to do with our practice. A man may be the greatest heretic on points of practice, provided he is not openly profane or vicious, and maintain a good standing in the Church. When we attempt to purify the Church in regard to practical errors, he cannot bear it.

Why is it so difficult to get the Church to do anything for the conversion of the world? When will the Church be purified and the world converted? Not until it is agreed that heresy in practice is the proof of heresy in belief. Not while a man may deny the whole gospel in his practice every day and yet maintain his standing in the Church as a "Good Christian."

A minister can be deceived in regard to the state of his congregation. If he preaches a good deal on abstract doctrines that do not immediately relate to practice, his people rejoice; and he thinks they are growing in grace. In fact, it is no certain sign that there is any Christianity among them. But if he preaches practical doctrines and his people show that they love the truth in regard to themselves practicing it, then they show they love the truth.

If a minister finds that his people rebel when he comes to press the practical doctrines, he can be sure that their Christianity is in a low state.

PRACTICE WHAT YOU BELIEVE

Many people suppose they are Christians from the emotions they feel in view of truth. But what they receive is truth presented to their minds in such a way that they do not see its bearing on themselves. If you present the truth to them, destroy their pride, and cut them off from their worldliness, they will resist it. Look at the Church. Many orthodox churches and orthodox Christians live and feed upon the abstract doctrines of religion from year to year. Then look further at their lives and see how little influence their professed belief has upon their practice. Do they have saving faith? It cannot be. I don't mean to say that none of these church members are virtuous but that those who do not practice what they admit in theory deceive themselves.

Are you conscious that the gospel is producing a practical effect upon you, according to your knowledge? Is it weaning you from the world? When you receive any practical truth into your minds, do you love its application to yourself? Do you take pleasure in practicing it? If you are not growing in grace, becoming more and more holy, and yielding yourselves up to the influence of the gospel, you are deceiving yourselves.

Woe to that man who admits the truth and yet turns away and does not practice it. He is like the man who, seeing his natural face in a mirror, turns away and forgets what he looks like.

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