

Wisdom Justified of Her Children

by Charles Finney

Wisdom is justified of all her children, and true wisdom consists in devoting ourselves to the promotion of the best ends, by the best means.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5-6, Proverbs 4:7, Ecclesiastes 7:12, Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:35, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 2:14, Colossians 2:3, James 1:5, 1 John 5:20

Topics: "Spiritual Discernment", "Wisdom"

Description

Charles Finney explores the concept of wisdom as it relates to the teachings of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, emphasizing that true wisdom is recognized and justified by those who are spiritually discerning. He contrasts the austere lifestyle of John, which called for repentance, with Christ's example of gospel liberty, which was misunderstood by the self-righteous. Finney argues that wisdom is about promoting the highest good through benevolence and that those who are truly wise will understand and appreciate the truth, while the selfish will stumble over it. He concludes that wisdom is validated by its fruits, as seen in the lives of those who embrace it.

Transcript

"But wisdom is justified of all her children." Luke 7:35

Before I enter directly upon the discussion of the text, I will remark,

1. That the dress, and manner of life of John the Baptist were manifestly typical of the state of repentance and humiliation to which he called the Jews at that particular time, and to which every soul is called before he received Christ, gospel liberty, and joy in the Holy Ghost. It had been common for the prophets of Israel, to adopt modes of life that were typical of the particular truths they were commissioned to announce.
2. Christ does not appear to have differed in his dress and dietetic habits from the mass of the people. It should be remembered, however, that among the eastern nations, modes of dress were not perpetually fluctuating as they are in the west. It is manifest that Christ was observant of the innocent civilities of life, attended marriages, and politely accepted the hospitality of all classes for the purpose of doing them good. He observed the rites of the ceremonial law, as they were typical, and that dispensation was not ended, but he paid no other regard to the superstitious traditions of the elders, than to rebuke them, and to reject their authority.

3. John's austere habits and manner of life--his severe rebukes and denunciations, were a stumbling-block to the self-righteous Jews. Being righteous in their own eyes, and not, in their own estimation, needing repentance and humiliation, they neither understood his preaching, nor the typical design of his dress, diet, and manner of living. From all these, they concluded that he was a railer and possessed an evil spirit.

4. Christ's preaching and manner of life were no less a stumbling block. Knowing nothing of gospel liberty, and not understanding that all things belong to God's children, and were to be wisely and temperately used by them with thanksgiving, they accused Christ of being a glutton and a wine-bibber. John's preaching and manner of life were designedly legal, in the sense that they were designed to make the Jews feel that they were in a state of condemnation, instead of being in a state of justification by faith in Jesus Christ. Christ's manner of life was a perfect specimen of gospel liberty, in opposition to the legal and conscience bound state in which the Scribes and Pharisees were, which was typified by John's habits and manner of life.

5. In the context Christ illustrates the manner in which the Jews had first treated John and afterwards Himself. 'And the Lord said, whereunto shall I liken the men of this generation, and to what are they like? They are like unto children sitting in the market-place, and calling one to another, and saying, we have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, he hath a devil. The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, behold a gluttonous man, and a wine bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! But wisdom is justified of all her children.' By John, He says, you were called to mourning, but you would not mourn. You resisted his rebukes and appeals, and said he had a devil. By me you are called to liberty and rejoicing, and this you reject as antinomian, and latitudinarian--accusing me of gluttony and intemperance. So that whatever is done for you, you are displeased and stumbled.

6. While the great mass of the Jews were stumbled, and would have been stumbled whatever might have been done for them, it was, nevertheless, true that the truly wise were edified, and saved.

In proceeding to the discussion of this subject, I will endeavor to show,

I. WHAT WISDOM IS, AND WHO ARE WISE.

II. THAT THAT WHICH IS WISE AND TRUE WILL BE JUSTIFIED AND APPROVED BY THE WISE.

III. THAT SELFISH SOULS WILL STUMBLE AT WHAT IS WISE AND TRUE, AND WHY THEY WILL DO SO.

I. What wisdom is, and who are wise.

1. Wisdom consists in devoting ourselves to the promotion of the best ends, by the best means.

2. This is exactly synonymous with true religion. Virtue, holiness, or true religion, consists, as has often been shown in my lectures, in disinterested benevolence. Benevolence consists in good willing, choosing, or intending, or, in other words, in devoting ones self to the promotion of the highest good of being for its own sake. In other words, true religion is the devotion of ones being to the glory of God and the highest good of his kingdom. This is wisdom. Therefore all truly religious persons are wise. All else are fools in the Bible sense of the term, devoting themselves to some unreasonable end and course of life.

II. That which is wise and true will be justified and approved by the wise.

1. All the truly wise or truly pious have one and the same end in view. It is this fact which distinguishes them as pious persons.

2. They will, therefore, substantially agree as to the means of promoting this end.

(1.) Because they all have spiritual discernment. 'But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.'

(2.) They are free from the bias of selfishness. They have no self righteous and legal prejudices to blind them on the one hand, and no idols to consult or lusts to gratify on the other. In just so far as their eye is single, they will naturally and readily apprehend the truth as it is. From the very constitution of their mind, they are the less likely to misunderstand the truth, by how much the less they are influenced by any selfish consideration. And the more likely to understand it aright, by how much the more single their eye is to the glory of God. Christ says, 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me. But a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him, for they know not the voice of stranger.' Here Christ plainly teaches that those who are truly his sheep, will not follow strangers; that is, they will not be led away into a fundamental error. The Apostle, in one of his letters, plainly teaches the impossibility of deceiving the elect.

(3.) The fact is, to those who are truly wise, the works, and providence, and word of God are one harmonious revelation of his natural and moral attributes. Having the same end in view that God has, they naturally, and easily understand Him. Being benevolent themselves, having their hearts set on doing the utmost good in their power, the attention of their mind being, of course, directed to that end, they are naturally struck at every turn, with the manifestation of benevolent design, that every where appears in the works, and ways and word of God. Turn their eyes where they will, their attention is immediately arrested with the fact, that God evidently has the same end in view which they have--has gone before them in laying the trains by which their benevolent plans may be carried out, and is, in innumerable ways co-operating with them in the promotion of the great end they have in view. They therefore very naturally come to an easy interpretation of the works and providence and word of God. They all speak a language which is familiar to them. It is the language of benevolence. And shall not the benevolent understand it? Does not love understand the language of love? I tell you that wisdom is justified of all her children.

(4.) To the truly wise, the law and gospel are one consistent scheme of revelation and salvation, and not contradictory and conflicting schemes. A truly pious person will behold at a glance the wisdom and benevolence of God, in the typical manner of teaching the gospel under the old Testament dispensation. He sees at once, that through those types and shadows, a future Christ, and justification by faith in Him, were taught. Truly pious persons see no difference in the way of salvation under the two dispensations--that they only differ in this, that in the old, Christ was presented through types and prophecies as a future sacrifice, while in the new He is presented in the simple form of history, as having lived and died, and thus set aside the necessity of the typical manner of teaching the gospel. To them God is the same in both dispensations and the spirit of all that He has ever done or said is one and the same.

III. Selfish minds will stumble at what is wise and true; and why they will do so.

1. Their state of mind, or the end for which they live, has a powerful tendency to beget misunderstanding. Being selfish, they naturally overlook the benevolence of God, as it is every where manifested in the works of creation. They have their eye upon the promotion of their own private interests, and see no benevolence in any thing that does not favor the particular end they have in view. They are often fretted

with the providence of God. Like the owl in the fable, that wondered why the sun was created, with so much light that he could not see to catch a mouse, the selfish sinner looks upon every thing as very untractable, and ill-natured, that does not fall in with his peculiar ends and aims. In this state of mind, he naturally misunderstands almost every thing that God does and says. If God commands him to glorify Him, he is apt to understand God as being selfish and ambitious, just as the sinner knows himself to be. He does not understand that God is purely and disinterestedly benevolent in such a requirement. He naturally understands all God's commands, promises, and threatenings, as founded in selfishness. He knows his own to be, and therefore naturally thinks of God, as being altogether such an one as himself. Furthermore, when God promises reward to virtue, and threatens evil to vice, he understands these as appeals to his selfishness.

2. Just so with the providence of God. The sinner misunderstands it at every step. If it should happen to fall in with his favorite pursuits and schemes, he looks upon God as being very partial to him, and perhaps thanks God, as we often hear selfish professing Christians do, for being so much better to him, than He is to others--for being so very partial to him in a great many respect. But on the other hand, if God's providence happen not to favor his particular pursuits and schemes, he is apt to look upon God as prejudiced against them and as indulging some pique--as acting towards them upon the principle of retaliation and revenge. Being conscious, to some extent, of the principles by which they know themselves to be actuated, they very naturally attribute the same motives to God--and thus they perpetually deceive themselves in regard to the divine character. God's works, and providence, and word, are universally good. They tend to one ultimate end--the highest good of being. God aims at promoting every interest according to its relative value. He proceeds upon a vast scale of benevolence, which induces Him to cause his sun to rise, and his rain to descend, upon the evil and the good. The very fact that God is pursuing one end, and the sinner another, leads the sinner, almost continually, to misinterpret God's ways, and works, and word. The wisdom and virtue of God so conflict with the sinner's selfishness, as to keep him in almost a continual fret.

3. The sinner's selfishness naturally tends to make him misunderstand the moral law, to overlook its spirituality, and to consider obedience to consist either in outward acts, or inward feelings. And seldom do sinners understand obedience to the moral law, to consist simply in universal disinterested benevolence.

4. The selfishness of the human heart, led the Jews to misunderstand and misinterpret the ceremonial law, and to look upon it as a religion or works. Instead of understanding it to be a system of typical instruction, by and through which the most spiritual truths were taught, their selfishness led them to regard the splendid temple and the vast round of rites and ceremonies, and costly sacrifices, as a splendid, costly, gorgeous set of rites, such as the great Mogul might institute, or some human deity might cause to be observed, in relation to himself.

5. Being in a selfish state of mind, and not understanding the spirit of the Old Testament, God appears to them, under that dispensation, to have been malignant, revengeful, selfish, bloody. Under the gospel, He appears to them as at the opposite extreme of selfishness, and as exhibiting such an overweening fondness for men, as to be far from exercising even needed severity. They seem unable to understand how it is, that it is the same God, and the same state of mind, that manifests itself under both dispensations. They are far enough from realizing, that the same benevolence required the exterminating wars in the days of Moses, and Joshua, and Samuel, that poured out the Savior's life's blood upon the cross, and manifested such vast forbearance in the days, and in the person of Christ. Their selfishness is such, that they do not understand how it is that benevolence manifests itself in all the variety of ways, in

which God has dealt with men at different times. They do not understand that it is the same benevolence, manifesting itself in a regard to the public good, that sends sinners to hell, and takes the righteous to heaven--that it was the same spirit in Samuel, that led him to hew Agag in pieces, before the Lord, that in other circumstances, in the person of Jesus Christ, could stand in the midst of the fiery furnace of persecution, even unto death, unangered, and sweetly quiet as a lamb.

6. One class of selfish minds are legalists. Having been convicted of sin, their selfishness takes on that peculiar type. They are, perhaps, remarkably strict in the outward observance of the Sabbath, and the ordinances of God's house. They seem to be always dissatisfied with themselves, and with every body else--vexed and harassed with the consideration that they do not meet the demands of their own conscience. They are always confessing their heart sins, but never forsake them. Having no faith in Christ, they know nothing of gospel liberty. Not knowing what it is to eat and drink for the glory of God, their table becomes a snare and a trap, and a stumbling-block to them, They are uncomfortable themselves, and render those around them so. Cheerfulness looks shocking to them, and appears altogether like unbecoming levity. Encouraging any of the arts, appears to them like conformity to the world, and even the temperate enjoyment of such things as are requisite to health, comfort, and usefulness, appears to them inconsistent with benevolence. They do not seem to know that all these things are parts of benevolence, but look upon them as a spirit of self-gratification, just as a man who knows nothing in his own experience, of eating from any other motives than self-gratification, would not, of course, understand how others could do the same things only as they were influenced by the same motives.

7. Another class of selfish persons are antinomian perfectionists. They have so much faith, as they vainly dream, that they can violate law without sin.

8. A third, and much larger class, are antinomian anti-perfectionists. They expect to be saved by imputed righteousness. They are far enough from intending or expecting to be holy or sanctified, in their own persons. They disclaim all pretensions to any thing more of personal holiness, than barely enough to support a faint hope that they have been regenerated. If they have been regenerated, with them, it is clear, that they are in a state of perpetual justification, on account of their once having exercised faith in Christ. They do not pretend to obey the law of God themselves, but as they understand it, Christ obeyed it for them, and his personal obedience is imputed to them. They acknowledge the law to be obligatory upon them, indeed, but suppose themselves to be justified by the gospel, while they live in disobedience to the law. Instead of regarding the gospel, as the means of inducing entire obedience to the law, they regard it as opposed to the law, in such a sense, as really to justify one who continues to disobey the law.

9. The same doctrines are understood differently by different persons, according to their different states of mind. The doctrine of self-denial, is understood by some, not as the deposing of self, the enthroning of God in the heart, the devotion of the whole being to Him, and doing every thing, even eating and drinking, for his glory. But to them, the doctrine of self-denial, is a system of penance, of outward retrenchments, of bodily mortifications, a denial and trampling down, of the very nature of man. Fastings, celibacy, and multitudes of monkish tricks, seem to be indispensable to their ideas of self-denial. They do not understand that in all these things, to what extremes soever they may be carried, there is not necessarily one particle of Christian self-denial. But these are oftentimes nothing else than the manifestations of a legal spirit, as may be seen in this. They are connected with an acid and vexed state of mind, a spirit of complaining and censoriousness--a disposition to complain of every body that does not fall in with their particular views, and come up to their particular standard.

10. Others understand the doctrine of Christian self-denial to mean nothing more than abstinence from outward extravagance. And to abstain from extravagance with them, is to keep a little back from going beyond every body else in self-indulgence.

11. But another class who are wise, understand the doctrine of self-denial to be as it is, a total renunciation of selfishness in all its forms, the doing, and using, and being every thing for the glory of God. They understand the doctrine of self-denial to require them to hold every thing, even life itself, at the absolute disposal of God, in so high a sense, as not to count their own lives dear to them, if the cause of Christ demands that they should be given up--that while they thus hold their lives and their all at the disposal of God, they do not wantonly and recklessly cast their lives away as a thing of nought, but carefully preserve and enjoy their lives, while, in the Providence of God permitted to do so. And so in regard to every thing else which they have and are. While every thing is held at God's disposal, they do not recklessly cast away and squander, or give away, to be squandered by the improvident around them, the useful things, which God has put in their possession, but temperately and thankfully use such of them, as can conduce to their health, comfort, or usefulness, until the Providence of God shall call for the relinquishment of some or all of them; for his glory. Then they count these things not dear to them, but yield instant possession, not only without gainsaying, but with joyfulness.

12. To one class of selfish minds, the doctrine of Christian liberty is synonymous with the doctrine of indulgences. With them, liberty is license. The denial even of their lusts, is legality and bigotry. They have so much faith, and such Christian liberty, that they can violate the laws of their being, use with impunity the most unhealthy kind of diet, and in the most extravagant and unhealthy quantities--can use narcotic drinks, and even take opium and alcohol, as some of the good things that God has made for their enjoyment. I know a woman, who is a most pertinacious smoker of tobacco. When expostulated with for using it, she calls it her Isaac, says she once laid it upon the altar, and the Lord gave her the privilege of using it. And she imagines that her faith is such, that she can use it without sin. Paying any attention to dietetic reform, or almost any branch of reform, is to this class of persons, legality. Because they are allowed things healthful, comfortable, convenient, they rush into the extremes of self-indulgence. To this class of persons the true exhibition of the doctrine of Christian liberty, is regarded as a license to extravagance, and intemperance in almost all things.

13. There is another class to whom the doctrine of true Christian liberty look suspicious, and at least to border hard upon self-indulgence. Their legal spirit is grieved with it. But the wise understand, and are edified by it. To them the doctrine of Christian liberty is only that of living, eating, drinking, dressing, being, using, and enjoying all really good and useful things, for good and useful purposes, and for the glory of God. To them there is no tendency to extravagance or intemperance, or licentiousness, in this doctrine, at all.

14. To one class of persons, the doctrine of Christian forbearance, as taught by Christ, and illustrated by his life, is synonymous with the doctrine of ultra non-resistance, that no government, family, state, or divine, has a right to use force, for the public good. To them, force, even in the suppression of mobs, insurrections, or to prevent the most horrible crimes, is inconsistent with Christian forbearance.

15. To another class Christian forbearance means nothing more than that you are to appeal to the civil law, instead of the bayonet or the fist, to secure your selfish ends. While to the wise, the doctrine of Christian forbearance, is nothing more than the true application of the law of universal benevolence to human conduct. There is a considerably large class of persons, the attitude of whose minds is such, that

they put such a construction upon particular precepts of Christ, as to make them flatly contrary to the spirit of the law as expounded by Himself. Christ has summed up the requirements of the moral law, and included all moral obligation in the two great precepts; 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself.' Now, it is agreed, so far as I know, on all hands, that the true spirit and meaning of the law of God, as thus explained by Christ, is, that every interest shall be regarded and treated according to its relative value. Consequently, that a less interest should always be sacrificed to a greater--that, of two evils, the least is to be preferred, and whenever a less interest comes in conflict with a greater, the less is to be given up, and the greater secured. This is the principle, upon which all just governments are administered. And no power in the universe can render it unlawful to inflict penalties by physical force, where the highest good demands it. But this class of persons would understand the precept, 'resist not evil,' to require so much, as that governments are not to suppress mobs, or rebellion, by physical force, or that evil should be resisted under any circumstances, and in cases where we have all the evidence we can have, that resistance is indispensable to the public good. Thus they array Christ against Himself, represent Him as giving such an exposition of the moral law, as to require every interest to be regarded and treated according to its relative value, and at the next breath, as saying that whatever the public good may demand, and whatever interest may demand it, evil is not to be resisted.

15. The doctrine of government, and of self-defense, under circumstances where the law of benevolence demands it, is to some, a license to revenge. To others, it is an antiquated relic of barbarous times--something that would do, under a former dispensation, when God was not as benevolent as He is at present, or when the severe Father, and not the benevolent Son of God, laid down rules of conduct. But with them, the present dispensation is one of an entirely different spirit, as if another God ruled the universe, and as if the present dispensation was designed to rebuke the former.

But to the wise, the doctrine of government, the infliction of penalties for the public good, of self-preservation and defense, where the law of benevolence plainly demands it, is only the true application of the law of love.

REMARKS.

1. The truly wise may be known by the manner in which they are affected by the truth. Preach to them whatever doctrine you will, if it be true they will understand it, be edified by it, and be sure to make a wise improvement of it, self-denial, or Christian liberty, Christian forbearance, or whatever doctrine you will, it will find its counter-balance in their minds--will not carry them to extremes, but will be the instrument of their sanctification. They that are not truly wise or religious will be seen to be injuriously affected by almost every truth you preach. Either they will not be moved by it in any direction, or they will go to such extremes as to develop a monstrosity of character. Wisdom is justified of all her children. I understand this to be a universal truth. And that this is the real characteristic, not only of some of these, but of all of those who are truly wise.

2. The selfish will of course misunderstand the wise. When they pursue outwardly the same course of conduct, they will be supposed to do so from the same motives. If they eat, drink, marry, or are given in marriage, build houses, cultivate land, pursue business of any kind--if they labor or rest, journey or stay at home, walk or ride, sleep or wake, or whatever they do, which is done by those who are selfish, it will be understood by them to be done from the same motives by which they are actuated. But in this they are entirely mistaken. They give themselves credit for just as much piety, as any have or can have, who do outwardly the same things. Their mistake lies in this, that they suppose others to be actuated by the same

motives with themselves.

3. None but spiritual minds understand what Christian liberty is. Paul understood what it was to be free from the restraints and constraints of the ceremonial law. And yet there was no tendency in his mind to a lax morality. A true Christian alone understands what it is to eat and drink, to dress, to walk and ride, to wake and sleep, and live, and be, and do, all for the glory of God. He alone knows how to use the things of this world as not abusing them, and understands the secret of owning all things, and yet selfishly indulging in the use of none of them.

4. Those who have been truly convicted of sin, and have seen the spirituality of the law of God, and are truly converted, if they fall back, generally fall into a state of legality, and find themselves in grievous and iron bondage, while others who have only been excited but not truly slain by the law and converted, will, when they fall from this excitement almost always fall into latitudinarian antinomianism. This last is much the largest class of professors of religion.

5. No doctrine of the gospel can be fully preached by an enlightened and benevolent mind, without frequent and painful apprehensions of the results on certain classes. He must watch with unspeakable solicitude, the developments that are made in different minds, as an almost certain indication of whether they are converted or not.

6. Whenever the mind has fallen into a misapprehension of any doctrine, and has consequently received a wrong bias, any attempt to correct that bias by the exhibition of the truth will shock prejudice, and give pain. For example: let one who has embraced the ultra doctrine of the non-resistants listen to a correct exhibition of the rights, necessity, and duties of government, the true principle of self-defense and self-preservation, and he will feel almost as much shocked as if he should witness the fighting of a duel. So let one who has embraced the idea of the doctrine of self-denial, which has been entertained in different ages of the Church by many persons, as requiring little less than a system of mendicancy--let such a one listen to a discourse on the doctrine of Christian liberty, and he will feel almost as much shocked as if you were granting indulgences to extravagance. So let one who has imbibed wrong notions on the subject of Christian retrenchment, that it requires Christians to give up every thing but the mere necessities of life, with whom it is a violation of Christian principle to use elliptic springs upon his wagon, or a top, or boot--to build a cornice on a house--to have a button on your coat where you do not need to use it--who will not allow that any thing is due to the eye or the ear--with such an one, improvements in the arts, the cultivation of music, painting, poetry, improvements in the style of building, in orders of architecture, in short almost all improvement in the physical condition of mankind, are regarded with jealousy if not with pain. He would listen to a discourse in which a true application of the law of God should be made to all such things, with unutterable pain, principally because of the perverted state of his mind, by a false view of the subject.

7. The wise feel relieved and refreshed with truth, when mist has been thrown around any subject, by those who are in error. They may have been thrown into doubt and embarrassment for a time, but when the light comes, they will receive it, and be edified and sanctified by it.

8. Every prominent doctrine of the gospel seems to be set for the rise and falling again of many in Israel. The spirit of reform is abroad in the land. The wise are temperately but firmly pushing these reforms. The rash misunderstand them and go to extremes. The conservatives misunderstand them also, and go in an opposite direction. It is curious to see how things move forward under the government of God. The

doctrines of the abolitionists, to some minds lead directly to and result in the most ultra views of non-resistance. The doctrine of entire sanctification in this life, in some minds, leads to antinomian perfectionism. But the wise understand. 'Wisdom is justified of all her children.' And multitudes see no tendency in abolition principles to ultra non-resistance, nor in the doctrine of sanctification to the doctrine of antinomian perfectionism. They hold on the even tenor of their way, in pushing these wholesome reforms upon the attention and to the hearts of men. May the Lord speed them. Amen.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/wisdom-justified-of-her-children/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net