

# Personalia

by Frank Grenville Beardsley

---

*Charles Finney was a remarkable individual who embodied the qualities of prayer, humor, generosity, and kindness, leaving a lasting impact on those around him.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 65:9, Psalm 145:18, Matthew 21:22, Mark 11:24, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, James 5:16, 1 John 5:14

**Topics:** "Prayer Life", "Faith Leaders"

---

## Description

Frank Grenville Beardsley preaches about the life and character of President Finney, highlighting his traits, characteristics, and the impact of his prayers. President Finney was known for his profound conviction in the efficacy of prayer, believing in God's ability to exceed all expectations. His prayers, although unique, were deeply reverent and intimate, as if conversing face to face with God. President Finney's practical approach to prayer was demonstrated in his fervent plea for rain during a severe drought, resulting in immediate downpour. His direct and pointed sermons, coupled with personal appeals, had a profound impact on his listeners, leading to transformative actions and reflections.

---

## Transcript

A LARGE number of anecdotes, amusing and otherwise, have been told of President Finney, many of which are apocryphal. The newspaper writers of his day eagerly seized upon any extravagant joke related of him and with keen delight made haste to give it currency. Of well authenticated incidents a few have been selected, the narration of which will afford a better conception of some of his traits and characteristics than could be done by a more formal attempt at the delineation of his character.

He very rarely departed from the rule adopted by the New Lebanon Convention to refrain from praying for anyone in public by name without his consent. One Sunday, however, Professor Morgan, his colleague in the pastorate of the Oberlin Church, was to occupy the pulpit. Professor Morgan was a very profound man, but his profundity was his weakness, for not infrequently he preached over the heads of the people. In the prayer that preceded the sermon Mr. Finney said: "O Lord, we ask that thou wilt give Brother Morgan great simplicity of utterance; may he preach the truth so clearly that we shall not be obliged to stand on tip-toe to grasp the thoughts which he is about to present."

On another occasion when the great choir, composed of college students, had rendered an elaborate but somewhat unintelligible anthem, he offered this petition, which discloses in a way his practical turn of mind: "O Lord, we trust that thou hast understood the song which they have tried to sing, but thou knowest

that we did not understand a word of it."

When Lincoln's successor was attempting those measures which brought him into disfavor with the North, Finney once prayed: "And now, Lord, we pray thee for Andrew Johnson. Wilt thou show him that he is only a man, and after all a very poor specimen of a man. But if he persists in misapprehending himself, then wilt thou put him to bed. Put a hook in his nose and keep him from doing this mischief."

Although his prayers had their peculiarities, there was nothing irreverent about them. To those who heard him, it seemed as if he were holding converse with his Maker face to face, and talking to One with whom he was on terms of the most intimate friendship. In his public prayers he seemed to be oblivious of the fact that anyone else was present aside from himself and his Maker whom he was addressing. This accounts for the peculiarities and the personal allusions which sometimes characterized them.

He had a profound conviction as to the efficacy of prayer. As a soul winner, as a preacher of righteousness, and as a theological instructor this was the great secret of his power. The present is not an age much given to prayer. To many, if not most, persons God seems remote and afar off. The supernatural has been ruled out. If it has any meaning at all, prayer is but a vague and indefinite subjective reaction. That God can actually give men the desires of their hearts is regarded not only as improbable but incredible. That would be an interference with the immutable laws of nature.

In contrast to these rationalistic views, Finney believed that God "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think." He accepted very literally the promise, "What things soever ye desire when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them." We must not infer from this, however, that Finney's view of prayer was naive and unphilosophical. On the contrary, in his lecture on the Prayer of Faith he expressly limits such prayer to the promises, the prophecies, and the providences of God, or to the direct and immediate promptings of the Spirit of God. In the latter, perhaps, is to be found an explanation for the fervor and urgency of his prayer in the incident which follows.

In the summer of 1853 northern Ohio was suffering from a severe drought, the pastures were dried up, and the prospects for a crop were very slender. Under these circumstances, with a cloudless sky above them, the members of the Oberlin congregation assembled one Sunday for worship. The burden of Finney's prayer was a plea for rain: "Lord, we want rain. We do not presume to dictate unto thee, but our pastures are dry, and the earth is gaping open for rain. The cattle are wandering about and lowing in search of water. Even the little squirrels in the woods are suffering from thirst. Unless thou givest us rain, our cattle will die and our harvests will come to naught. O Lord, send us rain, and send it now! Although to us there is no sign of it, it is an easy thing for thee to do. Send it now, for Christ's sake. Amen."

The service proceeded, but before he was half through with his sermon the rain descended in such torrents that he could scarcely be heard. He paused and said: "Let us praise God for this rain," and gave out the hymn,

When all thy mercies, O my God,

My rising soul surveys,

Transported with the view, I'm lost

In wonder, love and praise.

The congregation was so affected that many could not sing for weeping.\*

While free from conventionalities, his prayers as a rule were most tender and sympathetic. Especially was this true of his petitions at the close of the term, when the students were about to go out into the world to face its struggles and temptations. Their individual needs seemed to come before him as he pled with the Father in their behalf. One of the theological classes was about to graduate and they gathered in the lecture room for one of his last lectures. As usual he opened the hour with prayer. He prayed: "O Lord, here is a class of young men who are going forth to preach the everlasting gospel, and Thou knowest that their words will be like the repetition of parrots, unless Thou shalt fill them with the Holy Ghost." Thus he went on, oblivious of the recitation, with increasing fervor and earnestness, until the bell rang for the next recitation, when the members of the class one by one tiptoed out of the room leaving him still upon his knees before God.

When the National Congregational Council met in Oberlin in 1871 advantage was taken of the occasion to dedicate the new theological building, which from the event was named Council Hall. Although the building was not yet completed Mr. Finney was asked to offer the dedicatory prayer. He prefaced his prayer with these remarks: "I have felt somewhat embarrassed with regard to performing this part of the service, because the house is not entirely finished. I have several times refused to take part in dedicating a house of worship that was not paid for; but this is neither finished nor paid for, and hence I have some hesitation about offering it to God in this state. But I remember that I have often offered myself to God, and I am far from being finished yet, and why should I not offer this house just as it is? I will do so, relying upon the determination of those having it in charge to finish it as soon as possible."

His conversations sometimes were quite as remarkable as his prayers. He had been present at the burning of a grist mill and on his homeward way, after the fire had been extinguished, he met a student to whom he said: "Good evening, we've had quite a fire, haven't we? Are you a Christian?" On another occasion while he was out walking he met a tailor by the name of Godly, whom he stopped, saying, "I don't think I have ever met you before. What is your name?" Upon being informed, he exclaimed, "Godly! Godly! Well, are you a Christian, Mr. Godly?" "No, sir." "Well, then," replied Mr. Finney with a sorrowful cast of countenance, "it might just as well be Un-Godly."

Abrupt and impertinent as his questions often seemed to be, no mere recital of them can give any adequate impression of the effect that they produced. They never seemed strange or out of place to those of whom they were asked. The tone of his voice, the look in his eye, the serious aspect of his countenance, the evident sincerity of his manner were not soon forgotten by those to whom his words were addressed, and many of the students had occasion afterwards to look back with lifelong gratitude to the timely words which came to them from their college president, and which often were the means of bringing them into the Kingdom of Christ.

While he was always tender and sympathetic toward those who were sincere in their quest after higher things, he could brook no flippancy over matters of religion. A student, for the sake of argument, once went to him with the statement, "Mr. Finney, I'm afraid I've committed the unpardonable sin." Looking at him a moment, Finney replied abruptly, "Well, I guess you have." The young man was completely taken aback by the unexpected answer, and being led into a better frame of mind, became a Christian.

Early in his career he was approached by a Presbyterian elder with the question, "What would you think of a man who was praying week after week for the Holy Spirit and could get no answer?" "I should think that

he was praying from wrong motives." "But from what motives should one pray? If he wants to be happy, is that a false motive?" "Satan might pray with as good a motive," was the answer, and then the evangelist quoted the words of the Psalmist: "Uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee. See!" he went on, "the Psalmist did not pray that he might be happy, but that he might be useful, and that sinners might be converted." The elder at first was very angry, but being left to self-contemplation he soon realized that his whole attitude had been a selfish one and that after all he had never really been converted. He soon made confession to the evangelist and dedicated himself completely to the service of Christ.

In dealing with individuals and congregations his attitude was always practical. In a community which he once visited there had been a serious reaction against an extravagant religious excitement which had swept over it, leaving effects that were disastrous. He said: "I found that it had left some practices that were offensive, and calculated rather to excite ridicule than any serious conviction of the truth of religion. For example I found a custom prevailing like this: every professor of religion felt it a duty to testify for Christ. They must take up the cross and say something in meeting. One would rise and say in substance: 'I have a duty to perform which no one can perform for me. I arise to testify that religion is good; though I must confess that I do not enjoy it at present. I have nothing in particular to say, only to bear my testimony; and I hope that you will pray for me.' This concluded, that person would sit down and another would rise and say, 'Religion is good; I do not enjoy it; I have nothing else to say, only to bear my testimony; and I hope you will pray for me.' Of course the ungodly would make sport of this; it was in fact ridiculous and repulsive." To counteract the effect of this he substituted preaching services interspersed with prayers. He would talk for a time, and then he would call upon some sensible brother to lead in prayer, after which he would resume his discourse. In this way the evil practice was discontinued.

While he was pastor of Broadway Tabernacle, New York, he was so worn out by his excessive labors that a period of rest became imperative. He went for the purpose to a quiet village in the country. But like his Master, he "could not be hid." Not long after his arrival the pastor of the village church invited him to preach. At first he absolutely refused, but he learned that the pastor received a very small salary, one half of which was paid by the Ladies' Sewing Society, when there were men in the church who could pay the entire amount without feeling it. Speaking later of the incident, he said: "My indignation was stirred, and weak as I was I felt I must preach. I did so, and took for my text, 'Give an account of thy stewardship.' Towards the close of the sermon I applied my remarks to the officers of that church, and told them what I had heard, and I lashed them as with a whip of scorpions. While I was laying on the whip, the Senior Deacon rose up, and with tears streaming down his face, cried out, 'Mr. Finney! Mr. Finney! please don't say any more. I'll pay the whole of it!'"

Not long after he went to Oberlin the question of creed came up in the First Church. With a deep sense of the wrong which had been done to individuals and the injustice which had been wrought to the cause of religion by certain formulas of belief, he remarked: "I have sometimes thought that I would only have two articles in a creed: First, that the Bible is the only rule of faith; and Second, that every other creed under heaven is an abomination in the sight of God. But," he added, "I have observed that churches without creeds generally have not turned out well."

Charles G. Finney had as keen a sense as Martin Luther of the reality of the prince of this world. When a young convert came with horse and carriage to take him to Stephentown, he asked if the horse was safe. "Because if the Lord wants me to go to Stephentown, the devil will prevent it if he can; and if you have not a steady horse, he will try to make him kill me." To conclude the story he added: "Strange to tell, before we

got there, that horse ran away twice, and came near killing me. His owner expressed the greatest astonishment, and said he had never known such a thing before."

Not long before his death a man of professedly liberal views called to see him and after expressing general approval of Finney's teachings said: "But there is one point upon which I do not agree with you; I don't believe in a personal devil." "You don't!" exclaimed Finney, "You don't believe in a personal devil! Well, you resist him awhile, and you will believe in him."

Yet, with his vivid realization of the existence of a prince of evil, Finney always kept his feet on the ground. His daughter tells us that, in his old age, one night after midnight the family was awakened by the loud ringing of the doorbell. Finney himself answered the summons. At the door stood a tall colored man who said, "Dey hab got de debil ober hyar in de schoolhouse and de Lord wants you to come ober and drive him away; de Lord wants you to come." Finney looked at him a moment, and then, as he closed the door, replied: "Not He, at this time of night!"

His sermons were always direct and pointed. He often clinched them with personal appeals which brought the truth home to all who heard him. For example, if preaching to the church at Oberlin on the lack of faithful effort, he might turn and say: "How is it with Brother Morgan here? How is it in Brother H---'s neighborhood? Is Brother D-- fully alive to the work?"

On one occasion he preached from the subject, The Signs of a Seared Conscience. During the course of his remarks he said: "Just consider the condition in which I found myself yesterday. I engaged a number of men to make garden and put in my crops, but when I went to look for my farming tools I could not find them. Brother Mahan borrowed my plough some time ago and has forgotten to bring it back. Brother Morgan has borrowed my harrow and I presume has it still. Brother Beecher has my spade and hoe, and so all my tools were scattered. I appeal to you, how can society exist when such a simple duty as that of returning borrowed property does not rest as a burden upon the conscience?"

The effects of this sermon were quite remarkable.

The next morning before daybreak, some of the members of the family were awakened by the barking of a dog. Peering through the shutters into the darkness, they discovered the cause of the commotion. An old Scotchman to whom Finney had loaned a sawhorse was returning the borrowed property. Throughout the day implements came pouring in from all quarters, some of which Finney had never seen or heard of before.

One of the themes upon which he loved to dwell was the story of the Prodigal Son. In describing the anxious longing of the father he would shade his eyes with his hand as if to look for the home coming of his boy. Then he would feel for his glasses, which he did so naturally and so pathetically as to awaken no thought of the anachronism. To illustrate still further the anxiety of the waiting parents he would walk to the edge of the platform and, peering into the distance, would exclaim: "Ma, don't that look like our James?" The pathos of his voice, his manner, and gestures were such as to make the story indescribably touching and impressive.

With all of his abruptness and apparent severity of manner he had the saving sense of humor. On being told that a well known doctor of divinity wanted him to come and conduct a series of revival services he answered, "Yes, he would ride, if I would row the boat."

On being asked by a student why he never preached from the text, "They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water," he said that the idea of a man's forsaking a living fountain and trying to get water by working a creaking pump in an empty cistern seemed so ludicrous that he dared not trust himself before an audience with it.

At one time, on account of ill health, he was obliged to meet the theological students in his parlor where one of them, succumbing to the soporific influence of an easy chair, departed to the land of dreams. Finney closed the recitation with a prayer that the members of the class might be sufficiently interested in their study to be kept from sleeping. On their return the following day the students found to their dismay that the easy chairs had been replaced with straight-backed wooden ones from the kitchen. "You see, young gentlemen," said their teacher with a twinkle in his eyes, "I have found a way to answer my own prayers."

The following incident not only displays his keen sense of humor but was indicative of his own punctiliousness of habit. One of the professors at Oberlin was somewhat phlegmatic in temperament, and at his home they were very dilatory about responding to the doorbell. One day President Finney rang the bell, which, contrary to the usual procedure, was attended to by the professor's son with great promptness. The door opened as Finney's tall form disappeared out of the gate, but turning back he called, "Is that you, Charles? I thought I would ring the bell, go down town and be let in when I returned."

Dr. Gray of The Interior related the following incident: "The last time I ever met Mr. Finney, something was said at which he laughed heartily, showing a splendid set of teeth. When I remarked upon them he responded: 'I never lost but two in my life, and they were wisdom teeth, and that some of my theological friends may say accounts for it,' and he laughed again."

Notwithstanding his seeming austerity of manner, he was kindly and sympathetic by nature and generous to a fault. A kind-hearted woman once told him that Mr. Spencer, a missionary to the Ojibway Indians, had no overcoat, and he straightway sent him the best overcoat he had, one costing him in the neighborhood of fifty dollars.

In this narrative we have had little occasion to refer to purely personal matters in the life of the great revivalist. In this connection it should be said that he was thrice married. His first wife was Miss Lydia Andrews of Whitestone, New York, to whom he was married in the autumn of 1824. To them were born several children, four of whom grew to maturity--Charles, for many years an attorney in California; Frederick, a civil engineer who took an active part in railway promotion in Wisconsin; Helen, who after the early death of her first husband, Professor William Cochrane, became the wife of Gen. J. D. Cox, of Ohio; and Julia, wife of Professor James Munroe of Oberlin. Finney's first wife died in 1847. He afterwards married Mrs. Elizabeth F. Atkinson, of Rochester, who assisted him in his revival labors, conducting women's meetings in London, Boston, and elsewhere. She died in 1863. His third wife was Miss Rebecca A. Rayl, who had been assistant principal in the ladies' department at Oberlin. She passed away at Kentland, Indiana, September 12, 1907.

Finney's later years constituted the most tranquil period in his life. During his earlier labors his teachings had provoked a great deal of controversy and he was bitterly assailed on every hand. While he differed with some of his contemporaries on certain points of doctrine, his grasp upon the great essentials of the Christian faith never could be called into question. As time elapsed and men were enabled to see one another face to face his distinguishing views created less and less opposition, so that at last he came to

enjoy the confidence of his brethren to a much greater extent than had been the case at any other period during his eventful career.

He achieved a notable triumph at the meeting of the National Congregational Council, which was organized at Oberlin in November, 1871. He had been asked to address the Council on The Gift of the Holy Spirit. The weight of years was upon him, but his mind kindled to the great theme, which he treated with such sweet reasonableness as to disarm the prejudices of all who sat before him. Tears flowed down the faces of that great audience as he dwelt upon a subject which had been so vital to him throughout his long and useful life. The day following, when the Council witnessed the laying of the corner stone for Council Hall, the new theological building, Dr. Buddington, the moderator, could well say:

"I rejoice to stand this day upon the grave of buried prejudice. It is true that Oberlin has been a battle-cry in our ranks for a generation. It is so no longer, but a name of peace, of inspiration, and hope. What does the history of Oberlin prove but just this,--to hold sacred the individual conscience, and inviolable the liberty of the church? If days of darkness come, of suspicion and alienation, as sure as God's truth is great and the love of Christ pervasive the light will return and come again with a brighter and sweeter effulgence."

Finney continued his connection with the college to the time of his death, completing his last course of lectures to the theological students in July, 1875. His last days have been characterized by President Fairchild as follows:

"Notwithstanding the abundant and exhausting labors of his long public life, the burden of years seemed to rest lightly upon him. He still stood erect, as a young man, retained his faculties to a remarkable degree, and exhibited to the end the quickness of thought and feeling, and imagination, which always characterized him. His life and character perhaps never seemed richer, than in these closing years and months. His public labors were of course very limited, but the quiet power of his life was felt as a benediction upon the community, which, during these forty years, he had done so much to guide and mold and bless."

Mr. Finney's death took place August 16, 1875. His last day on earth was a peaceful Sabbath, which he had enjoyed in the midst of his family. At sunset he walked out with his wife to listen to the music at the opening of the evening service in the church near by. The worshipers were singing "Jesus, lover of my soul." He took up the words and sang with the invisible congregation to the end. That night upon retiring he was seized with pains at the heart. About two o'clock in the morning he asked for some water. But it could not quench his thirst, and he said, "Perhaps this is the thirst of death." A moment later he added, "I am dying." These were his last words. When morning dawned he had joined the choir invisible.

In 1908, through the benefaction of his son, the late Frederick Norton Finney of Milwaukee, the Finney Memorial Chapel, a massive structure of stone, with a seating capacity of two thousand, was erected at Oberlin at a cost of one hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars. A marble bust of President Finney by Andreoni of Rome, presented to the College in 1900 by Frederick Norton Finney, occupies a central position in the vestibule. Upon a tablet is the following inscription:

THAT THE YOUTH  
OF THIS FOUNDATION OF LEARNING  
MAY DAILY MEET TO WORSHIP GOD

AND THAT A SON MAY HONOR  
THE MEMORY OF HIS FATHER  
THIS CHAPEL IS BUILT  
AS A MONUMENT  
TO  
CHARLES GRANDISON FINNEY  
BY  
HIS YOUNGEST SON  
FREDERICK NORTON FINNEY  
IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD  
1908

\* Two or three years later another dry season occurred in that section, and at an evening service Professor Morgan prayed for rain. A slight downpour followed. On the way home a new student observed to another that they had had a remarkable evidence of answered prayer. But the other, who had been present on the occasion above described, replied, "You ought to hear President Finney pray for rain. When Professor Morgan prays for rain, it just drizzles, but when President Finney prays, it pours!"

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/frank-grenville-beardsley/personalia/>

# *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](http://www.sermonindex.net)**