

Idolatry and the Fear of God

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of serving the Lord and not serving one's own gods, highlighting the difference between the fear of the Lord and a slavish fear.

Scripture: 2 Kings 17:33, Psalm 40:8, Matthew 6:24, Matthew 16:25, Acts 9:7, Colossians 3:23

Topics: "Idolatry", "True Service to God"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the issue of idolatry and the fear of God, emphasizing that many people fear the Lord while still serving their own gods, driven by selfish motives rather than true devotion. He explains that there are two types of fear: a reverent fear rooted in love and a slavish fear based on dread of punishment, which leads to a superficial worship that does not involve true service to God. Finney challenges the notion of 'Sunday Christians' who compartmentalize their faith, serving God only on Sundays while pursuing their own interests throughout the week. He calls for a radical commitment to serving God in all aspects of life, urging believers to renounce selfishness and prioritize the advancement of God's Kingdom. Ultimately, he warns that true Christianity requires a complete surrender of oneself and one's possessions to God, rather than a mere performance of religious duties.

Transcript

"They feared the Lord, and served their own gods"--2 Kings 17:33

When the ten tribes of Israel were carried away by the king of Assyria, their land was repopulated with strangers of different idolatrous nations who knew nothing of the religion of the Jews. Very soon, the wild beasts increased in the country, and the lions destroyed multitudes of the people. They thought it was because they did not know the god of that country and had therefore ignorantly transgressed and offended him.

So they applied to the king, who told them to get one of the priests of the Israelites to teach them the manner of the god of the land. They took this advice and obtained one of the priests to come to Bethel and teach them the religious ceremonies and modes of worship that had been practiced there. And he taught them to fear Jehovah as the god of that country. But still, they did not receive Him as the only God. They feared Him, that is, they feared His anger and His judgments; and to avert these they performed the prescribed rites.

But they served their own gods. They kept up their idolatrous worship, and this was what they loved and preferred, although they felt obliged to pay some reverence to Jehovah as a god of that country. Multitudes of persons still profess a certain kind of fear of the Lord who nevertheless serve their own gods--other things to which their hearts are supremely devoted and in which they mainly put their trust.

SERVING IN BONDAGE AND SELFISHNESS

There are two kinds of fear. There is the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom and is founded in love. There is also a slavish fear, which is a mere dread of evil and is purely selfish. This is the kind of fear that was possessed by those people spoken of in the text. They were afraid Jehovah would send His judgments upon them if they did not perform certain rites, and this was the motive they had for worshipping Him. Those who have this fear are supremely selfish and, while they profess to reverence Jehovah, have other gods whom they love and serve.

To serve a person is to be obedient to the will and devoted to the interests of that individual. To serve God is to make Christianity the main business of life and to devote one's self, heart, life, powers, time, influence and all to build up the Kingdom of God and advance His glory. Who are they who profess to fear the Lord but serve their own gods? Anyone who has not heartily and practically renounced the ownership of his possessions and given them up to the Lord.

Suppose a gentleman were to employ a clerk who continued to attend to his own business. When asked to do what is necessary for his employer, who pays him wages, he replied, "I really have so much business of my own that I have no time to do these things." Such a servant was not serving his employer at all. His time was paid for by another, but he served himself. Where a man has not renounced the ownership of himself, not only in thought but practically, he has not taken the first step in Christianity. He is not serving the Lord but serving his own gods.

The man who does not make his business a part of his Christianity does not serve God. Sometimes men say that they are engaged all day in business and don't have time to serve God. They think they serve God a little while in the morning and then attend to their worldly business. They are not serving God. It is a shame for them to pretend to serve God. They are willing to give God the time before breakfast or before they go to work, but as soon as that is over, away they go. They fear the Lord enough to pray morning and night, but they serve their own gods.

Their religion is the laughing stock of hell. While they pray devoutly, they serve themselves instead of engaging in business for God. No doubt the idols are well satisfied with the arrangement, but God is wholly displeased.

Many of you make religion consist in certain acts of piety that do not interfere with your selfishness. You pray in the morning with your family because you can do it then very conveniently. But don't interfere with the service of your own god or stand in the way of your getting rich and enjoying the world. The gods you serve make no complaint of being slighted or neglected for the service of Jehovah.

SUNDAY CHRISTIANS

Multitudes of people suppose that the week is man's time and the Sabbath is God's. They think they have a right to do their own work during the week and promote their own interests, if they will only serve God on Sunday.

A celebrated preacher, in illustrating the wickedness of breaking the Sabbath, used this illustration: "Suppose a man having seven dollars in his pocket should meet a beggar in great distress and give him six dollars, keeping only one for himself. And the beggar, seeing that he retained one dollar, should turn and rob him of that--would not every heart despise his baseness?" This illustration embodies the idea that it is ungrateful to break the Sabbath since God has given to men six days for their own and only reserved the Sabbath for Himself.

You that do this do not serve God at all. If you are selfish during the week, you are selfish altogether. To suppose you had any real piety would imply that you were converted every Sunday and unconverted every Monday. But is the Sabbath a day to serve God, exclusive of other days? Is God in need of your services on Sunday to keep His work going?

God requires all your services as much on the six days as on the Sabbath! He has appropriated the Sabbath to peculiar duties and required its observance as a day of rest from toil, cares, and labors that concern the present world. But because God uses men to accomplish His purpose, and the gospel is to be spread and sustained by the things of this world, God requires you to work all the six days at your secular employments. It is all for His service as much as the worship of the Sabbath.

Sunday is no more given for the service of God than Monday. You have no more right to serve yourselves on Monday than you have on Sunday. If any of you have imagined that the six days of the week are your own time, it shows that you are supremely selfish. Do not consider that in prayer and on Sunday you are serving God if the rest of the time you are serving yourself. You have never known the radical principle of serving the Lord.

Anyone serving themselves or their own gods will make few sacrifices of personal ease and comfort. When a man enters into service, he gives up his ease and comfort for the interest of his employer. Is a man supremely devoted to the service of God when he shows that his own ease and comfort are dearer than the Kingdom of Jesus Christ? He would rather sacrifice the salvation of sinners than sit on a hard pew or be separated from his family for an hour or two!

Do you give your time and money to God's service grudgingly or by constraint? What would you think of your servant if you had to push him all the time to do anything for your interest?

Many people do everything grudgingly. If they do anything, it comes hard. If you go to one of these characters and want his time or money, it is difficult to get him interested. He does not consider the interests of Christ's Kingdom higher than his own. He may make a show of fearing the Lord, but he serves gods of his own.

HOLIDAY OR SACRIFICE?

Those who are aiming to elevate their own families into a different sphere by storing up wealth show that they have some other object to live for than bringing this world under the authority of Jesus Christ. They have other gods to serve. They may pretend to fear the Lord, but they serve their own gods.

Many people profess to be the servants of God but are eagerly gathering property and planning to retire in the country. Has God given you a right to a perpetual Sabbath as soon as you have made a lot of money? Did God tell you, when you professed to enter His service, to work hard for so many years and then have a continual holiday? Did He promise to excuse you after that from making the most of your time and

talents and let you live at ease the rest of your days? If your thoughts are set upon this, you are not serving God but your own selfishness and sloth.

You can find people who greatly love things that do them no good, and others even form artificial appetites for positively loathsome things. No arguments will prevail upon them to abandon their habits for the sake of doing good. Are such persons absorbed in the service of God? Certainly not. Will they sacrifice their lives for the Kingdom of God? Why, you cannot make them even give up bad habits to save a soul from death.

Selfishness reigns in such people. It show the astonishing strength of selfishness. You often see selfishness showing itself in little things. The true state of a man's mind stands out so strongly that it will not give place to those great interests for which he ought to be willing to lay down his life.

People who are most readily moved to action by appeals to their own selfish interests show that they are serving their own gods.

Suppose I want a man to build a church. How can I convince him? Must I show him how it will improve the value of his property, advance his business, or gratify his selfishness in some other way? If he is more excited by these motives than he is by a desire to save perishing souls and advance the Kingdom of Christ, he has never given himself to serve the Lord. He is still serving himself. He is more influenced by his selfish interests than by all those benevolent principles on which Christianity turns. The character of a true servant of God is opposite to this.

Many people are more excited by other subjects than the Lord. You find them talking about politics or philosophy, and if you bring up Christianity, the conversation immediately stops. They would rather talk about animal feelings, showing that the Lord is not the subject that is nearest their hearts. A man is always most easily excited about that subject that lies nearest his heart. When you can talk early and late about the news and other worldly topics but cannot possibly be interested in the Lord, you know that your heart is not in it. If you pretend to be a servant of God, you are a hypocrite.

When a man is more jealous for his own fame than for God's glory, it show that he lives for himself and serves his own god. Who is his god, himself or the Lord? Imagine a minister thrown into a fever because somebody criticizes his scholarship or his dignity, while he is as cool as ice at all the indignities thrown upon the blessed God. Is that man a follower of Paul, willing to be considered a fool for the cause of Christ? If he understood Christ, he would rejoice to have his name cast out as evil for His cause.

CUSHIONED PEWS AND FOLDED HANDS

That which gives value to a Christian institution is the salvation of sinners and the sanctification of saints. The end for which Christ lives, and for which He has left His Church in the world, is to draw all men to Himself. This is the business to which God calls His servants. If any man is not doing this as the main object of his life, he is not serving the Lord but is serving his own gods.

People who seek for happiness in Christianity, rather than for usefulness, are serving their own gods. Their religion is entirely selfish. They want to enjoy religion and are always asking how they can be happy and pleasurable excited in religious exercises. They will only go to meetings that will make them happy, never asking whether that is the way to do the most good or not. They are content to do nothing but sit on their cushioned pews and have the minister feed them.

Instead of seeking how to do good, they are only seeking to be happy. Their daily prayer is not that of the converted Saul of Tarsus, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do" (acts 9:7) but, "Lord, tell me how I can be happy." Is that the Spirit of God? No. He said, "I delight to do thy will, O my God" (Psalm 40:8). Is that the spirit of the apostle Paul? No. He threw off his upper garments at once and made his arms bare for the field of labor.

Those who make their own salvation their supreme object are serving their own gods. Many people in the Church show by their conduct and their language that their leading object is to secure their own salvation. Their grand determination is to get their own soul planted on the firm battlements of the heavenly Jerusalem and walk the golden fields of Canaan above. If the Bible is not in error, all such characters will go to hell. Their religion is pure selfishness. For "Whosoever will save his life shall loose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:25)

Very little is accomplished in the world for Jesus Christ because so few do anything for Him. Jesus has few real servants in the world. How many people do you think there are in the Church that are really at work for God and striving to advance the Kingdom of Christ? The reason that Christianity advances no faster is that there are few to advance it and many to hinder it.

You see a crowd of people at a fire trying to get the goods out of a store. Some are determined to get the goods, but the rest are not doing anything. They divert their attention by talking about other things or hinder the workers by finding fault with their way of doing it. The Church is very similar. Those who are trying to do the work are greatly hindered by the backwardness, the objections, and the resistance of the rest.

Few Christians have the spirit of prayer. How can they have the spirit of prayer? And why should God give it to them? Suppose God gave a man engaged in his worldly scheme the spirit of prayer. Of course he would pray for things nearest his heart: his worldly schemes to serve his own gods. Will God give him the spirit of prayer for such purpose? Never!

WHERE DO YOU STAND?

Many professing Christians have not begun to serve the Lord at all. A man said to one of them, "Do you feel that your property and your business are all God's, and do you hold and manage them for God?" "Oh, no," he said, "I have not gone as far as that yet." Not got as far as that! That man had been professing Christianity for years and still did not consider all that he had as belonging to God! No doubt he was serving his own gods.

I insist that this is the very beginning of Christianity. What is conversion but turning from the service of the world to the service of God? And yet this man had not discovered that he was God's servant. He seemed to think it would be a big step to feel that all he had was the Lord's.

You who are performing religious duties from selfish motives are in reality trying to make God your servant. If your own interests are supreme, all your services are performed to induce God to promote your interests. Why do you pray, go to church, or give money to Christian causes? You answer, "For the sake of promoting my own salvation." Indeed! Not to glorify God but to get to heaven!

Don't you think the devil would do the same if he thought he could gain his end by it--and be a devil still? The highest style of selfishness is to try to get God, with all His attributes, enlisted in the service of your

mighty self!

Are you serving the Lord, or are you serving your own gods? How are you doing? Have you done anything for God? Have you been living as a servant of God? Is Satan's kingdom weakened by what you have done? Could you say now, "Come with me, and I will show you this sinner converted or that backslider reclaimed or this weak saint strengthened and aided?" Could you bring living witnesses of what you have done in the service of God?

Or would your answer be, "I have been to church every Sunday and heard a great deal of good preaching, and I have generally attended the prayer meetings. I have prayed with my family and read the Bible." And in all that, you have been merely passive. You have feared the Lord and served your own gods.

"Yes, but I have sold so many goods and made so much money, of which I intend to give a tenth to the missionary cause."

Be not deceived. If you loved souls and were striving to serve God, you would think of souls here and do the work of God here. What are we to think of a missionary going to another country who has never said a word to a sinner at home? Does he love souls? The man that will do nothing at home is not fit to go to the mission field. And he that pretends to be saving money for missions while he will not try to save sinners here is an outrageous hypocrite.

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