

# Men Often Highly Esteem What God Abhors

by Charles Finney

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*This sermon highlights the difference between what men highly esteem and what God abhors, emphasizing the importance of benevolence and morality in one's actions.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 1:11-17, Matthew 6:24, Matthew 7:21-23, Luke 16:15, Romans 13:10, 1 Corinthians 10:24, Galatians 5:13, Philippians 2:4, James 1:27, 1 John 3:17

**Topics:** "Selflessness vs. Selfishness", "True Morality"

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## Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that what is highly esteemed by men is often abominable to God, as illustrated by the Pharisees who justified themselves while neglecting true devotion. He argues that the world's standards of morality are based on selfishness, contrasting them with God's requirement for universal benevolence and selflessness. Finney critiques the negative morality prevalent in society, where individuals are praised for merely avoiding wrongdoing rather than actively seeking the good of others. He warns that many religious practices, if devoid of genuine love and benevolence, are equally abominable to God. Ultimately, he calls for a reevaluation of our motives and actions to align with God's standards rather than societal expectations.

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## Transcript

"Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men, is abomination in the sight of God." -- Luke xvi. 15.

CHRIST had just spoken the parable of the unjust steward, in which He presented the case of one who unjustly used the property of others entrusted to him, for the purpose of laying them under obligation to provide for himself after expulsion from His trust. Our Lord represents this conduct of the steward as being wise in the sense of forethoughtful, and provident for self -- a wisdom of the world, void of all morality. He uses the case to illustrate and recommend the using of wealth in such a way as to make friends for ourselves who at our death shall welcome us into "everlasting habitations." Then going deeper, even to the bottom principle that should control us in all our use of wealth, He lays it down that no man can serve both God and Mammon. Rich and covetous men who were serving Mammon need not suppose they could serve God too at the same time. The service of the one is not to be reconciled with the service of the other.

The covetous Pharisees heard all these things, and they derided Him. As if they would say, "Indeed, you seem to be very sanctimonious, to tell us that we do not serve God acceptably! When has there ever been

a tithe of mint that we did not pay?" Those Pharisees did not admit His orthodoxy, by any means. They thought they could serve God and Mammon both. Let whoever would say they served Mammon, they knew they served God also, and they had nothing but scorn for those teachings that showed the inconsistency and absurdity of their worshipping two opposing gods and serving two opposing masters.

Our Lord replied to them in the words of our text, "Ye are they who justify yourselves before men, but God knoweth your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God."

In pursuing the subject thus presented, I shall --

Show how and why it is that men highly esteem that which God abhors.

1. They have a different rule of judgment. God judges by one rule; they by another. God's rule requires universal benevolence; their rule is satisfied with any amount of selfishness, so be it sufficiently refined to meet the times. God requires men to devote themselves not to their own interests, but to His interests and those of His great family. He sets up but one great end -- the highest glory of His name and kingdom. He asks them to become divinely patriotic, devoting themselves to their Creator and to the good of His creatures.

The world adopts an entirely different rule, allowing men to set up their own happiness as their end. It is curious that some pretended philosophers have laid down the same rule, viz.: that men should pursue their own happiness supremely, and only take care not to infringe on others' happiness too much. Their doctrine allows men to pursue a selfish course, only not in a way to infringe too palpably on others' rights and interests.

But God's rule is, "Seek not thine own." His law is explicit, "Thou shalt love (not thyself, but) the Lord thy God with all thy heart." "Love is the fulfilling of the law." "Charity (this same love) seeketh not her own." This is characteristic of the love which the law of God requires -- it does not seek its own. "Let no man seek his own, but every man another's." 1 Cor. x. 24. "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." "For all seek their own, and not the things which are Jesus Christ's." Phil. ii. 4, 21. To seek their own interests and not Jesus Christ's, Paul regards as an entire departure from the rule of true Christianity.

God regards nothing as virtue except devotion to this end. The right end is not one's own, but the general good. Hence God's rule requires virtue, while man's rule at best only restrains vice. All human governments are founded on this principle, as all who study the subject know. They do not require benevolence, they only restrain selfishness. In the foundation principles of our government it is affirmed that men have certain inalienable rights, one of which is the right to pursue each his own happiness. This is affirmed to be an inalienable right, and is always assumed to be right in itself, provided it does not infringe on others' rights or happiness. But God's rule requires positive benevolence and regards nothing else as virtue except devotion to the highest good. Man's rule condemns nothing, provided man so restrains himself as not to infringe on others' rights.

Moral character is as the end sought. It can not be predicated of muscular action, but must always turn on the end which the mind has in view. Men always really assume and know this. They know that the moral character is really as the end to which man devotes himself. Hence God's law and man's law being as they are, to obey God's is holiness; to obey only man's law is sin.

Men very inconsiderately judge themselves and others, not by God's rule, but by man's. They do this to an extent truly wonderful. Look into men's real opinions and you will see this. Often, without being at all aware of it, men judge themselves, not by God's rule, but by their own.

Here I must notice some of the evidences of this, and furnish some illustrations.

Thus, for example, a mere negative morality is highly esteemed by some men. If a man lives in a community and does no harm, defrauds no man, does not cheat, or lie; does no palpable injury to society; transacts his business in a way deemed highly honorable and virtuous -- this man stands in high repute according to the standard of the world. But what does all this really amount to? The man is just taking care of himself; that is all. His morality is wholly of this negative form. All you can say of him is, He does no hurt. Yet this morality is often spoken of in a manner which shows that the world highly esteem it. But does God highly esteem it? Nay, but it is abomination in His sight.

Again, a religion which is merely negative is often highly esteemed. Men of this religion are careful not to do wrong but what is doing wrong? It is thought no wrong to neglect the souls of their neighbors. What do they deem wrong? Cheating, lying, stealing. These and such like things they will admit are wrong. But what are they doing? Look round about you even here and see what men of this class are doing. Many of them never try to save a soul. They are highly esteemed for their inoffensive life; they do no wrong; but they do nothing to save a soul. Their religion is a mere negation. Perhaps they would not cross a ferry on the Sabbath; but never would they save a soul from death. They would let their own clerks go to hell without one earnest effort to save them. Must not such a religion be an abomination to God?

So, also, of a religion which at best consists of forms and prayers and does not add to these the energies of benevolent effort. Such a religion is all hollow. Is it serving God to do nothing but ask favors for one's self?

Some keep up Sabbath duties, as they are termed, and family prayer, but all their religion consists in keeping up their forms of worship. If they add nothing to these, their religion is only an abomination before God.

There are still other facts which show that men loosely set up a false standard, which they highly esteem, but which God abhors. For example, they will require true religion only of ministers; but no real religion of anybody else. All men agree in requiring that ministers should be really pious. They judge them by the right rule. For example, they require ministers to be benevolent. They must enter upon their profession for the high object of doing good, and not for the mere sake of a living -- not for filthy lucre's sake, but for the sake of souls and from disinterested love. Else they will have no confidence in a minister.

But turn this over and apply it to business men. Do they judge themselves by this rule? Do they judge each other by this rule? Before they will have Christian confidence in a merchant or a mechanic, do they insist that these shall be as much above the greed for gain as a minister should be. Should be as willing to give up their time to the sick as a minister -- be as ready to forego a better salary for the sake of doing more good, as they insist a minister should be? Who does not know that they demand of business men no such conditions of Christian character as those which they impose on Gospel ministers? Let us see. If a man of business does any service for you, he makes out his bill, and if need be, he collects it. Now suppose I should go and visit a sick man to give him spiritual counsel -- should attend him from time to time for counsel and for prayer, till he died, and then should attend his funeral; and having done this service, should make up my bill and send it in, and even collect it; would there not be some talk? People would

say, What right has he to do that? He ought to perform that service for the love of souls, and make no charge for it. This applies to those ministers who are not under salary to perform this service, of whom there are many. Let any one of these men go and labor ever so much among the sick or at funerals, they must not take pay. But let one of these ministers send his saw to be filed, and he must pay for it. He may send it to that very man whose sick family he has visited by day and by night, and whose dead he has buried without charge, and "for the love of souls;" but no such "love of souls" binds the mechanic in his service. The truth is, they call that religion in a layman which they call sin in a minister. That is the fact. I do not complain that men take pay for labor, but that they do not apply the same principle to a minister.

Again, the business aims and practices of business men are almost universally an abomination in the sight of God. Almost all of these are based on the same principle as human governments are, namely, that the only restraints imposed shall be to prevent men from being too selfish, allowing them to be just as selfish as they can be and yet leave others an equal chance to be selfish too.

Shall we go into an enumeration of the principles of business men respecting their objects and modes of doing business? What would it all amount to? Seeking their own ends; doing something, not for others, but for self. Provided they do it in a way regarded as honest and honorable among men, no further restriction shall be imposed.

Take the Bible Society for an illustration. This institution is not a speculation, entered upon for the good of those who print and publish. But the object aimed at is to furnish them as cheap to the purchaser as possible, so as to put a Bible into the hands of every human being at the lowest possible price. Now it is easy to see that any other course and any different principle from this would be universally condemned. If Bible societies should become merely a speculation they would cease to be benevolent institutions at all, and to claim this character would bring down on them the curses of men. But all business ought to be done as benevolently as the making of Bibles; why not? If it be not, can it be a benevolent business? and if not benevolent, how can it have the approval of God? what is a benevolent business? The doing of the utmost good -- that which is undertaken for the one only end of doing good, and which simply aims to do the utmost good possible. In just this sense, men should be patriotic, benevolent, should have a single eye to God's glory in all they do, whether they eat or drink or whatever they may do.

Yet where do you find the man who holds his fellow-men practically to this rule as a condition of their being esteemed Christians, viz., that in all their business they should be as benevolent as Bible societies are? What should we say of a Bible society which should enter upon a manifest speculation and should get as much as they can for their Bibles, instead of selling at the lowest living price? What would you say of such a Bible society? You would say, "Horrible hypocrite!" I must say the same of every Christian who does the same thing. Ungodly men do not profess any Christian benevolence, so we will not charge this hypocrisy on them, but we will try to get this light before their mind.

Now place a minister directly before your own mind, and ask, Do you judge yourself as you judge him? Do you say of yourself, I ought to do for others gratuitously all and whatever I require him to do gratuitously? Do you judge yourself by the same rule by which you judge him?

Apply this to all business men. No matter what your business is, whether high or low, small or great; filing saws, or counting out bank bills; you call the Bible society benevolent; do you make your business as much so and as truly so in your ends and aims? If not, why not? What business have you to be less benevolent than those who print, publish, and sell Bibles?

Here is another thing which is highly esteemed among men, yet is an abomination before God, viz.: selfish ambition. How often do you see this highly esteemed! I have been amazed to see how men form judgments on this matter. Here is a young man who is a good student in the sense of making great progress in his studies (a thing the devil might do), yet for this only, such young men are often spoken of in the highest terms. Provided they do well for themselves, nothing more seems to be asked or expected in order to entitle them to high commendation.

So of professional men. I have in my mind's eye the case of a lawyer who was greatly esteemed and caressed by his fellow-men; who was often spoken of well by Christians; but what was he? Nothing but an ambitious young lawyer, doing everything for ambition -- ready at any time to take the stump and canvass the whole country -- for what? To get some good for himself. Yet he is courted by Christian families! Why? Because he is doing well for himself. See Daniel Webster. How lauded, I had almost said canonized! Perhaps he will be yet. Certainly the same spirit we now see would canonize him if this were a Catholic country. But what has he done? He has just played the part of an ambitious lawyer and an ambitious statesman; that is all. He has sought great things for himself; and having said that, you have said all. Yet how have men lauded Daniel Webster! When I came to Syracuse, I saw a vast procession. What, said I, is there a funeral here? Who is dead? Daniel Webster. But, said I, he has been dead a long time. Yes, but they are playing up funeral because he was a great man. What was Daniel Webster? Not a Christian, not a benevolent man; everybody knows this. And what have Christians to do in lauding and canonizing a merely selfish ambition? They may esteem it highly, yet let them know, God abhors it as utterly as they admire it.

The world's entire morality and that of a large portion of the Church are only a spurious benevolence. You see a family very much united and you say, How they love one another! So they do; but they may be very exclusive. They may exclude themselves and shut off their sympathies almost utterly from all other families, and they may consequently exclude themselves from doing good in the world. The same kind of morality may be seen in towns and in nations. This makes up the entire morality of the world.

Many have what they call humanity, without any piety; and this is often highly esteemed among men. They pretend to love men, but yet after all do not honor God, nor even aim at it. And in their love of men they fall below some animals. I doubt whether many men, not pious, would do what I knew a dog to do. His master wanted to kill him, and for this purpose took him out into the river in a boat and tied a stone about his neck. In the struggle to throw dog and stone overboard together, the boat upset; the man was in the river; the dog, by extra effort, released himself of his weight, and seizing his master by the collar, swam with him to land. Few men would have had humanity enough -- without piety -- to have done this. Indeed, men without piety are not often half so kind to each other as animals are. Men are more degraded and more depraved. Animals will make greater sacrifices for each other than the human race do. Go and ask a whaleman what he sees among the whales when they suffer themselves to be murdered to protect a school of their young. Yet many mothers think they do most meritorious things because they take care of their children.

But men, as compared with animals, ought to act from higher motives than they. If they do not, they act wickedly. Knowing more -- having the knowledge of God and of the dying Saviour as their example and rule -- they have higher responsibilities than animals can have.

Men often make a great virtue of their abolitionism though it be only of the infidel stamp. But perhaps there is no virtue in this, a whit higher than a mere animal might have. Whoever understands the subject of slavery and is a good man at heart will certainly be an abolitionist. But a man may be an abolitionist

without the least virtue. There may not be the least regard for God in his abolitionism, nor even any honest regard to human well-being. He may stand on a principle which would make him a slaveholder himself, if his circumstances favored it. Such men certainly do act on slaveholding principles. They develop principles and adopt practices which show that if they had the power, they would enslave the race. They will not believe that a man can be a colonizationist, and yet be a good man. I am no colonizationist, but I know good men who are. Some men not only lord it over the bodies of their fellow-men, but over their minds and souls -- their opinions and consciences -- which is much worse oppression and tyranny than simply to enslave the body.

Often there is a bitter and an acrimonious spirit -- not by any means the spirit of Christ; for while Christ no doubt condemns the slaveholder, He does not hate him. This biting hatred of evil-doers is only malevolence after all; and though men may ever so highly esteem it, God abominates it.

On the other hand, many call that piety which has no humanity in it. Whip up their slaves to get money to give to the Bible Society! Touch up the gang; put on the cat-o-nine-tails; the agent is coming along for money for the Bible Society! Here is piety (so called) without humanity. I abhor a piety, which has no humanity with it and in it, as deeply as I condemn its converse -- humanity without piety. God loves both piety and humanity. How greatly, then, must He abhor either when unnaturally divorced from the other!

All those so-called religious efforts which men make, having only self for their end, are an abomination to God.

There is a wealthy man who consents to give two hundred dollars towards building a splendid church. He thinks this is a very benevolent offering, and it may be highly esteemed among men. But before God approves of it He will look into the motives of the giver; and so may we, if we please. The man, we find, owns a good deal of real estate in the village, which he expects will rise in value on the very day that shall see the church building determined on, enough to put back into his pocket two or three fold what he pays out. Besides this he has other motives. He thinks of the increased respectability of having a fine house and himself the best seat in it. And yet further, he has some interest in having good morals sustained in the village, for vice is troublesome to rich men and withal somewhat dangerous. And then he has an indefinable sort of expectation that this new church and his handsome donation to build it will somehow improve his prospects for heaven. Inasmuch as these are rather dim at best, the improvement, though indefinite, is decidedly an object. Now if you scan these motives, you will see that from first to last they are altogether selfish. Of course they are an abomination in God's sight.

The motives for getting a popular minister are often of the same sort. The object is not to get a man sent of God, to labor for God and with God, and one with whom the people may labor and pray for souls and for God's kingdom. But the object being something else than this, is an abomination before God.

The highest forms of the world's morality are only abominations in God's sight. The world has what it calls good husbands, good wives, good children; but what sort of goodness is this? The husband loves his wife and seeks to please her. She also loves and seeks to please him. But do either of them love or seek to please God in these relations? By no means. Nothing can be farther from their thoughts. They never go beyond the narrow circle of self. Take all these human relations in their best earthly form, and you will find they never rise above the morality of the lower animals. They fondle and caress each other, and seem to take some interest in the care of their children. So do your domestic fowls, not less, and perhaps even more. Often these fowls in your poultry yard go beyond the world's morality in these qualities which the

world calls good.

Should not human beings have vastly higher ends than these? Can God deem their highly esteemed qualities any other than an abomination if in fact they are even below the level of the domestic animals?

An unsanctified education comes into the same category. A good education is indeed a great good; but if not sanctified, it is all the more odious to God. Yes, let me tell you, if not improved for God, it is only the more odious to Him in proportion as you get light on the subject of duty, and sin against that light the more. Those very acquisitions which will give you higher esteem among men will, if unsanctified, make your character more utterly odious before God. You are a polished writer and a beautiful speaker. You stand at the head of the college in these important respects. Your friends look forward with hopeful interest to the time when you will be heard of on the floor of Senates, moving them to admiration by your eloquence. But alas, you have no piety! When we ask, How does God look upon such talents, unsanctified, we are compelled to answer -- Only as an abomination. This eloquent young student is only the more odious to God by reason of all his unsanctified powers. The very things which give you the more honor among men will make you only the scoff of hell. The spirits of the nether pit will meet you as they did the fallen monarch of Babylon, tauntingly saying, "What, are you here? You who could shake kingdoms by your eloquence, are you brought down to the sides of the pit? You who might have been an angel of light -- you who lived in Oberlin; you, a selfish, doomed sinner -- away and be out of our company! We have nobody here so guilty and so deeply damned as you!"

So of all unsanctified talents -- beauty, education, accomplishments; all, if unsanctified, are an abomination in the sight of God. All of those things which might make you more useful in the sight of God are, if misused, only the greater abomination in His sight.

So a legal religion, with which you serve God only because you must. You go to church, yet not in love to God or to His worship, but from regard to your reputation, to your hope, or your conscience. Must not such a religion be, of all things, most abominable to God?

REMARKS.

The world have mainly lost the true idea of religion. This is too obvious from all I have said to need more illustration.

The same is true to a great extent of the Church. Professed Christians judge themselves falsely because they judge by a false standard.

One of the most common and fatal mistakes is to employ a merely negative standard. Here are men complaining of a want of conviction. Why don't they take the right standard and judge themselves by that? Suppose you had let a house burn down and made no effort to save it; what would you think of the guilt of stupidity and laziness there? Two women and five children are burnt to ashes in the conflagration; why did not you give the alarm when you saw the fire getting hold? Why did not you rush into the building and drag out the unconscious inmates? Oh, you felt stupid that morning -- just as people talk of being "stupid" in religion! Well, you hope not to be judged very hard, since you did not set the house on fire; you only let it alone; all you did was to do nothing! That is all many persons plead as to their religious duties. They do nothing to pluck sinners out of the fire, and they seem to think this is a very estimable religion! Was this the religion of Jesus Christ or of Paul? Is it the religion of real benevolence? or of common sense?

You see how many persons who have a Christian hope indulge it on merely negative grounds. Often I ask persons how they are getting along in religion. They answer, pretty well; and yet they are doing nothing that is really religious. They are making no effort to save souls -- are doing nothing to serve God. What are they doing? Oh, they keep up the forms of prayer! Suppose you should employ a servant and pay him off each week, yet he does nothing all the long day but pray to you!

Religion is very intelligible and is easily understood. It is a warfare. What is a warrior's service? He devotes himself to the service of his country. If need be, he lays down his life on her altar. He is expected to do this.

So a man is to lay down his life on God's altar, to be used in life or death, as God may please, in His service.

The things most highly esteemed among men are often the very things God most abhors. Take, for example, the legalist's religion. The more he is bound in conscience and enslaved, by so much the more, usually, does his esteem as a Christian rise.

The more earnestly he groans under his bondage to sin, the more truly he has to say --

"Reason I hear, her counsels weigh,

And all her words approve;

Yet still I find it hard to obey

And harder yet to love," --

By so much the more does the world esteem and God abhor his religion. The good man, they say -- he was all his lifetime subject to bondage! He was in doubts and fears all his life! But why did he not come by faith into that liberty with which Christ makes His people free?

A morality, based on the most refined selfishness, stands in the highest esteem among men. So good a man of the world they say -- almost a saint; yet God must hold him in utter abomination.

The good Christian in the world's esteem is never abrupt, never aggressive, yet he is greatly admired. He has a selfish devotion to pleasing men, than which nothing is more admired. I heard of a minister who had not an enemy in the world. He was said to be most like Christ among all the men they knew. I thought it strange that a man so like Christ should have no enemies, for Christ, more like Himself than any other man can be, had a great many enemies, and very bitter enemies too. Indeed, it is said, "If any man will live godly in Christ Jesus, he shall suffer persecution." But when I came to learn the facts of the case I understood the man. He never allowed himself to preach anything that could displease even Universalists. In fact, he had two Universalists in his Session. In the number of his Session were some Calvinists also, and he must by no means displease them. His preaching was indeed a model of its kind. His motto was -- Please the people -- nothing but please the people. In the midst of a revival, he would leave the meetings and go to a party; why? To please the people.

Now this may be highly esteemed among men; but does not God abhor it?

It is a light thing to be judged of man's judgment, and all the lighter since they are so prone to judge by a false standard. What is it to me that men condemn me if God only approve? The longer I live, the less I

think of human opinions on the great questions of right and wrong as God sees them. They will judge both themselves and others falsely. Even the Church sometimes condemns and excommunicates her best men. I have known cases, and could name them, in which I am confident they have done this very thing. They have cut men off from their communion, and now everybody sees that the men excommunicated were the best men of the Church.

It is a blessed thought that the only thing we need to care for is to please God. The only inquiry we need make is -- What will God think of it? We have only one mind to please, and that the Great Mind of the universe. Let this be our single aim and we shall not fail to please Him. But if we do not aim at this, all we can do is only an abomination in His sight.

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