

On Injustice to Character

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of not judging others unjustly, as it can lead to quenching the Spirit, benumbing the religious sensibility, augmenting selfishness, and destroying influence.

Scripture: Matthew 7:1

Topics: "Injustice", "Character Assessment"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the sin of injustice to character, emphasizing that we must not judge others based on isolated actions but rather on the overall state of their character. He warns against the dangers of prejudice, selfishness, and the absence of love, which lead to unjust judgments. Finney highlights that character is revealed through habitual actions and intentions, and that forming opinions without sufficient knowledge is a grave error. He stresses the importance of mutual love and consideration in all relationships, urging believers to avoid the sin of slander and to uphold the dignity of others. Ultimately, he calls for self-examination and repentance for those who have wronged others through unjust judgments.

Transcript

"Judge not, that ye be not judged, For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again, And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye."--Matt. 7:1-3

This passage forbids us to judge persons; and our first inquiry should be--What is not intended in this prohibition?

I answer, (1.) It does not forbid forensic judgments, for this would make the passage forbid what God elsewhere requires, and what is obviously essential to the ends of justice among men.

(2.) Nor, does it prohibit all forming opinions as to others. If we have the means of forming a correct opinion, and if circumstances render it fit and needful that we should form an opinion, obviously it cannot be forbidden. Plainly it does not prohibit the forming of righteous opinions whenever we have the means and it becomes necessary to form an opinion.

What then does this passage mean?

I answer, it means to prohibit injustice to character. It forbids unjust judgments.

Here it becomes necessary to inquire--Wherein does character consist? I answer, in the voluntary state of mind of an active agent. I say by his state, rather than by any individual volition. You must take the man and his acts as a whole in order to estimate his character. His character is as the voluntary state of his mind. If this be committed to good, such is his character; if to evil, his character is to be estimated accordingly. Character always pertains to ultimate purpose and intention, and should never be predicated on individual, abnormal acts, which are aside from the general strain of a man's life.

How is character revealed?

In the habitual life and temper, and not in any one individual act. Our Lord reveals the true doctrine when he says--"By their fruits ye shall know them,"

What is the rule of judgment?

Not to judge from single, insulated acts. To judge David only by his acts towards Uriah and his wife, would do him great injustice. In that transaction, David acted not in, but out of his general character. Hence, we are never to judge by occasional, irregular acts; such are aside from the common course of one's life; but by its general tenor. Some persons have their easily besetting sins, that do occasionally develop themselves; yet their general character should not be judged altogether from these. To do so, would greatly wrong them.

What are the sources of injustice to character? All prejudice towards character is injustice. It is prejudgment--forming an opinion in advance of adequate grounds for it. This is always wrong.

As to the sources whence unjust judgments arise, we may trace them,

1. To human selfishness. Men judge others by themselves. Being themselves selfish, they judge others to be so likewise. Nothing is more common than for men to regard others as selfish who will not give in to their own selfish demands. It is through their own selfishness that sinners mis-estimate God and withhold from him the credit due for his loving-kindness. In the same manner they mis-estimate better men than themselves. They mis-conceive every body's motives if those motives are of a higher moral grade than they are conscious of possessing.

In the same manner self-will leads men to mis-estimate others. Becoming offended and irritated, they are in no state of mind to judge others fairly.

The selfish representations of others often mislead us into false judgments. We are little aware how often and how sorely we are misled in this way. Others mistake, and then lead us into the same false opinions. In such cases we are not responsible, provided we use our best judgment in all candor and kindness, being duly on our guard against being deceived and making all due allowance for this liability.

Another source is the absence of that love which would forbid us to do injustice to character. It is unnatural to love to do injustice to others. Love in our hearts secures us against this liability; but if love be wanting, we are almost sure to err. The absence of love leads to a want of consideration as to the value and sacredness of character. Often we see persons treat the character of others with a reckless levity, as if they had no due regard to its value and sacredness. Such persons are always inflicting wanton wrong on character.

Often persons misjudge because they form opinions without sufficient knowledge. They judge before they have any right to judge. No man has any right to judge the character of another until he has sufficient data. Especially should he cautiously refrain from an unfavorable judgment, if compelled to form an opinion on slender acquaintance. In such cases, let his mind by all means lean towards a favorable opinion and not its opposite.

Again, men should never be impetuous and rash in forming judgments of others. We sometimes see this in a most alarming degree. It is often a fruitful source of great wrong.

Any form of dishonesty in us works mis-judgment in regard to others. A man given to lying will have no confidence in other men's veracity. A hypocrite has no confidence in other people's piety, but will have it that others are as hypocritical as himself. The licentious man thinks others licentious; the ambitious man suspects everybody else of ambition. If avaricious, he assumes that others are as much so; if given to over-reaching, he suspects others of the same tendency. Thus any special type of vice in his own character will surely affect his judgments of others.

Again, the state of one's feelings often prejudices the judgment. A wrong bias in one's feelings almost always results in injustice towards others.

Existing prejudice begets new and additional prejudice. One prejudice begets another. Under the influence of a first prejudice, it is almost impossible to avoid a second. A man already prejudiced, is in great measure incapacitated from right judgment, and consequently he goes on in one mistake and wrong after another, till he surrounds himself with an ocean of prejudice.

Let us next consider our danger of falling into this sin.

We are in danger of receiving too strong an impression from first acquaintance. Some are proud to say that they can read anyone's character on an acquaintance of five minutes. "Let me only see a person once--hear a single remark--I can read him through and through." They seem to pride themselves on their discernment, as if they had a superhuman power. But observe where you will, this is commonly a Satanic discernment--sure almost to be a false one, and to do injustice to character.

We shall almost certainly misjudge if we form our opinion from single facts. Suppose men should judge David thus on the case of Uriah; how greatly would they wrong him and themselves too? Yet there are persons who, having heard of one thing, say, That is enough! I know him now. They refuse to hear anything more; but leap to an unjust conclusion at once.

Often we suffer ourselves to be influenced by that which is no fact at all. We accept it on testimony which would by no means, in our view, have condemned a husband or a wife, a parent or a child, or any whom we love as ourselves. Then it ought not to be accepted against a stranger.

Of course we are in danger of mis-judgment when we form opinions without knowing all the essential facts in the case. We are specially culpable when we rush to a conclusion without first learning all the important facts within our reach. For this rash conduct, God will by no means hold us guiltless. Manifestly we ought to suspend our judgment till we can and do know, and not be restive or rash. Some months since, I was favorably impressed with the course of a gentleman of deservedly high standing, to whom I had been presenting my views of the doctrine of sanctification. I had given him the outlines of the doctrine and of the grounds of it as it lay in my mind, and then asked him his opinion. He replied--I have been a judge on the

bench for many years, and I have learned that it is never safe to form an opinion without hearing the other side. In the present case, I have not thought on the subject enough to form a reliable judgment. You have made out a fair case, but I want to hear all sides. You may be right; but how can I say I think you are till I have given the subject a thorough and all-sided investigation?

Now, in this case, it was, doubtless, important to hear all sides and give the question a patient and full investigation. How much more, if the case had involved personal character?

Where the question turns on the quality of an individual act, we are in danger of misjudging it by omitting to consider the individual's general character. For example, here is a good man, whom you have known to be such, and it is now said he has lied. Now, whether this be so or not so, you should certainly be very slow to admit it, and should by all means give him the credit of his previous good character, on the side of innocence. If there be testimony to outweigh this presumption, see that you examine it candidly, and be sure there is enough of it.

Public men are liable to be placed in circumstances where they cannot give to others the reason of their conduct. Suppose you were to judge such men without regard to their general character, and without the means of knowing their reasons. You surely would wrong them greatly.

Sometimes we are in great danger because we overlook our own state of mind. In such cases we shall doubtless be misled. It is of the utmost importance that we should be aware of our relation to the facts in the case, and the influence which this relation may have on our own judgment. Disregarding this, we shall most surely do injustice to character. For example, suppose a friend of ours is accused of crime. Our friendship for him arouses our feelings, and must have a strong influence on our judgment in the case.

Often we are biased by an undue regard to our own consistency. If we are not aware of the influence which this feeling has on our minds, we shall most surely be misled by it in the formation of our judgments.

I need not urge that we are in danger of being biased by those who themselves make mistakes; or by those who are dishonest; or who are reckless; or by the general injustice to character which prevails among mankind, in the midst of which we are born and the influence of which it must be exceedingly difficult for us entirely to escape.

I must now call your attention to the great wickedness of this sin.

Character, as a condition of happiness, is the most valuable treasure in the universe. To each moral agent, his own character is the greatest good. If his character be not intrinsically upright, it must be a scorpion sting in his bosom. If it be bad in his own estimation, he can have no self-respect, and his very bosom becomes a sort of hell. Every man's happiness and usefulness, therefore, depend on his own character, and, to a great extent, on his reputation--that is, on the estimate that others shall form and express, of his character. God, in his word, assumes that his honor and great name are a most sacred treasure. How could he govern his moral universe without it? Many persons forget that God has a character to sustain, and that he must, therefore, most severely punish every insult and wrong inflicted upon it. In like manner they forget that, out of sympathy with the slandered, if for no other reason, God will surely take vengeance on those who traduce their neighbors.

Injustice to character is in every point of view a most detestable and infamous crime. God hates and denounces it; it is an abomination in the eyes of all the good in the universe. The stealing of money is

nothing compared to it. "Who steals my purse, steals trash; but he who steals my name steals that which nought enriches him, but makes me poor indeed."

The greatest injury we can inflict on anyone is to rob him of his good name. So, the greatest injustice we can do to God is to manifest want of confidence in him. It is like taking hold of the pillars of the universe and shaking them to their foundations. Every where, this sin involves serious consequence beyond any other. It inflicts the greatest evil on the wronged party; the greatest on society. Suppose it falls on the character of one who devotes his utmost powers to doing good; then it cripples his power, and wrongs the community out of the good he might otherwise do in it. No mischief that any moral agent can do is greater than this.

Next, let us notice some of the results of injustice to character, and first--to the authors of this injustice.

Those who commit this great wrong are sure to quench the Spirit. If they are impenitent sinners, they are sure to grieve the Spirit away. God regards character as sacred;--that of his own people, is to him as the apple of his eye. "Touch not, says he, mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm." The Bible is full of indications like this of God's regard to the reputation of his people. Hence, we must infer that this sin is especially repugnant to the divine Spirit, who comes under the gentle, loving emblem of a "dove."

This sin benumbs the religious sensibility. We should not wonder that one guilty of stealing should benumb his moral sensibility; and if he could bring his feelings to commit the crime of murder, we should expect him to be utterly callous to all tender and kind emotions; but it is too much overlooked--strangely indeed--that slanderers and all who can coolly inflict injustice on character, do utter violence to their own sensibility. They so benumb it that it refuses to move and act in its natural way. They become so hardened, they can sit under preaching that might almost electrify the very seats they sit on, and yet nothing moves their sensibility or their conscience. Go where you will among the churches, you see that this is one of their sorest evils. This sin fearfully stifles the voice of conscience, and perverts the moral judgment. Under its influence, men come to feel no compunction for this sin, and they also seem to lose that nice perception of evidence under which an unperverted mind judges uprightly of character. It is amazing to see of how slight evidence they will take up an evil report against a neighbor, and how incapable they become of judging righteously.

Again, it augments the selfishness of the will. It is wonderful to see how the soul, under the sway of this sin, becomes committed to selfishness, loses all regard to others' rights and interests, and thus shuts itself up to the eternal dominion of the basest, purest selfishness. There cannot be a worse obstacle to conversion or to sanctification than this.

It destroys one's influence. It wounds the feelings of others, and puts them beyond the reach of your influence. What good can a minister do, or a deacon, if they allow themselves to injure the good name of their people! Sometimes a whisper, or even a look, will paralyze all the power and influence which a brother may have. It may break the arm of its strength so that it shall ever after hang useless by his side.

Wrong done to the moral government of the universe spreads its mischief far and wide. Wrong done to the good name of God's people reaches indirectly his own good name and influence of his cause in the world, and thus favors hell and wrongs heaven!

REMARKS

God sustains to the universe a very difficult and responsible position. The reasons of his policy cannot be fully explained to his finite subjects, and, therefore, are almost of necessity misunderstood. At least it is safe to say that his reasons for his course will not ever be fully understood. He cannot explain if he would; and often it may not be wise to explain all he could. On every side he has many and most unreasonable prejudices to overcome. No earthly monarch ever had such opposition to contend against; no, not all of them together have had so much trial, so much grief, so much strange and blind opposition from this source as God has had. In part, this is to be ascribed to human depravity, and in part to the relations of the Infinite to finite minds. Christ had occasion to say to his friends, "What I do ye know not now, but ye shall know hereafter." God often needs to say to his people--I cannot explain this to you now; you must have faith in me.

This reveals the importance of faith in finite minds towards their Infinite Father. We know God is infinitely wise, and makes no mistakes. We equally know him to be perfectly good, and, therefore, that he always acts with the best intentions; yet we cannot know all his reasons--cannot fathom all his plans. Here, then, is the struggle--here between unbelief and faith. Will you embrace all God's character and ways, so as to give him the fullest credit for all he is and for all he does? This is the highest style of virtue; this most eminently pleases God.

As I have already said, no being in all the universe is the subject of so much injustice to character as God. He has reason to complain of his subjects, and to hold them responsible for their great sin in this thing. Rulers in all governments are in a very trying position. Civil magistrates, parents, teachers,--often have their motives impugned. Often they have reason to feel that theirs is a thankless position. They find it perhaps quite impossible to reconcile their convictions of duty with the wishes and expectations of their subjects. Persons in such relations must make up their minds to bear meekly all they are called to suffer. Every parent has this class of trials more or less. Sometimes they are unable to make their children appreciate their views.

Hence, both rulers and ruled should exercise great patience and forbearance, and should be slow to judge unfavorably of each other, even though there should seem to be real testimony looking towards an unfavorable decision.

Mutual love and consideration are demanded in all the relations of life. Everything that may qualify the motives of others should be candidly considered. There should be an abounding fullness of that love which hopeth all things,--since only this can prevent great injustice to character.

Violations of this precept are the greatest evils in general society. Who can bear to read the political newspapers? Sometimes the same objection lies equally against the religious papers. They are full of calumny; they reek with rankest abuse of character. Never since I have been a Christian have I been able to read a daily paper. I have never found one that was safe to read.

A great deal is said in professedly promoting reform which injures and retards reform. I have always supposed that the injustice done to character in the great reforms of the age has hindered these reforms more than everything else has done. For this reason, God is displeased with these movements, and suffers them to be frustrated, and truth, for the present, to fall to the ground;--this being a less evil than for him to seem to sanction a spirit so utterly alien to genuine love.

This sin strengthens itself, and, therefore, is one of the hardest to overcome. He who commits himself to evil speaking against a neighbor, will be strongly tempted to carry it out. He has said that neighbor is a bad

man; now he must prove it. He must rake up more low and perhaps false scandal against him;--else his own reputation will suffer. So he plunges deeper and yet deeper into this sin. Perhaps if called to account, he replies--["]You think that statement of mine is not true; I will look the matter all over and see." I tell you, he won[']t! He will do no such thing as revise that opinion candidly. Far more likely his committal will blind him the more and he will become only the more confirmed in his sin at every step.

Many are so hardened as not to realize the relation of what they say to God and to the moral universes. They do not seem at all to appreciate the great evil of injustice to character. What sinner ever realizes the nature of his unbelief towards God? God says--"He that believeth not, makes him a liar!" How terrible to destroy confidence in God! What an awful, mischievous, damning sin! Look at the wrong done to Christ by the Scribes and Pharisees, and the mischief it did in the world. But for their virulence and prejudice in rejecting Christ, the people would have embraced him as their Messiah. To all human view, if they had received Christ candidly, and given him their hearts, the nation would have been converted, and that nation, converted, would have sent the gospel at once all over the world. Such was their location, and such their relation to the nations of the earth, they would have given the gospel to all nations in a single generation, and long ago, shouts of salvation would have rolled over every mountain, and echoed through every valley in all the globe! Alas, hell gloats over the misery and all nature groans under the evils, wrought by injustice to character! What an amount of evil! Who can estimate it? Who can measure the depth, and length and breadth thereof!

If this sin were not so common, it would be universally disgraceful. If, according to its real turpitude, it were in as low repute as other sins, who would dare commit it?

It is most painful to come near one who is in the habit of taking up evil reports and casting them about him as "firebrands and arrows, saying--Am I not in sport?" You should avoid one who has this habit as you would a viper.

I have thought a mistake is working in community as to the manner in which we should treat persons who wrong society and manifest no repentance for this sin. It is easy and but too natural for us to put on a plaster where we should put in a probe. Certainly we ought to mark the man who goes about slandering society. In this thing, there are two extremes; one consists in treating such offenders without any compassion; the other, in overlooking their great wickedness. Plainly we should try to avoid both extremes.

How great is the cruelty of injuring the character of another, and especially, of using an influence to crush it! Their words eat as doth a canker, annihilating those on whom they fall! O how much does it become us to take care what we say of others' character!

It is most cruel towards God to injure the character of his children. God himself feels outraged by such abuse offered to those he loves. We who are parents know very well how it affects us to have our children slandered, even though they may be wicked.

It is specially cruel to injure those who labor for our good. Ingratitude in this case heightens to wrong.

What an awful amount of sin the conductors of the press have to answer for! Especially for their course on the eve of an election. Then we cannot, often, believe a word they say. It would almost seem that many of them lie then on principle and by system! Perhaps the election is carried by such slander, and the men who rule us in the places of civil power are there because their friends had superior skill in falsehood and

slander! Before high heaven, what a nation of slanderers! I have often had occasion to say to editors who coin and pass on slanders just before election--If you allow a lie to go out from your press for election purposes, you must answer for it to God! Are you prepared to meet God for this thing?

A man not just to character is not just to anything! He is a totally dishonest man, and just to nothing. If he appears to be just, it is an appearance only. What an appalling thought! There can be no stronger proof of radical dishonesty of character, and unmitigated selfishness.

Some seem to regard confidence in those around us as a ridiculous weakness, if not crime. This is most unfortunate, for how much is he to be pitied--perhaps blamed too--who confides in no one, and lives in everlasting distrust of all mankind! The Psalmist once said, "All men are liars;" but he said it "in his haste," and we hope only when in haste.

When one shows a general want of confidence, he deserves none in himself. This is obvious as an axiom.

Perhaps in no other thing is frequent self-examination more demanded than in this matter of doing injustice to character. The temptation and tendency to violate the law of love is so great, we need to overhaul our practice continually. Evermore let us search our hearts and our words, asking--Do I deal justly with others even as I would have others do with me? Do I judge the motives of others only as I would have another judge mine?

No department of self-examination is more difficult than this. Hence, it needs to be pressed faithfully, with much self-distrust, and thoroughly, through all the circle of our formed and expressed opinions as to others. On no point is there more danger of delusion, and on none is this delusion more likely to prove fatal. Professed Christians are but too apt to forget that this is radically a dishonest state of mind, and hence, must be inevitably damning.

It is shocking to notice how evil reports are gotten up, spread abroad and received; how a lie passes round and round, and how rarely it meets with one kind, honest, loving heart, to impede its progress!

Men guilty of this sin, will die and be damned for it unless they are willing to repent, confess and make restitution. Who does not say--if a man steals but a horse or a sheep, and dies without confession and restitution, he cannot be saved. How much more must he die for such a sin as this, unrepented of and unforgiven!

This sin is so fearfully common, its great enormity is overlooked. Scarce anyone estimates it according to its real malignity. But suppose a sin of this kind should occur in heaven. Suppose one of the holy there should slander his brother unjustly! What a sensation! How would those pure and loving hearts be paralyzed with horror! And suppose society here were what it should be, how suddenly would men shut out from their fellowship one who could recklessly or maliciously traduce his brother! Is not this true? When we are really benevolent, what a shock comes over our feelings to hear one belch out an avalanche of venom! We are horrified! What! We say, is not this the spirit of hell?

In the great judgment God will show up this sin in its true light. Then he will place him that loves and him that receives, on a par with him that makes, a lie. The spirit of the act will give it its character then.

Where persons are really guilty, there is danger of doing them injustice. But God never falls into this danger. His judgment is eternally and perfectly just. And he would have us aim at entire justice. His word informs us that one of the loftiest angels did not bring a railing accusation against even the devil--but

said--"The Lord rebuke thee." This example in high places stands for our admonition. We should no more abuse and wrong an enemy than a friend.

We would be specially on our guard in cases where we differ from others in opinion. Here pride of opinion comes in to heighten the danger of doing injustice to others.

Often, (as our text suggests) God visits retribution for this sin on men visibly in the present life. He shapes his providence's so that those who judge others censoriously, are themselves judged censoriously. But, if this retribution should not come down on men in this world, it surely will, (and only the more surely for the omission here,) in the world to come. God will judge those who thus judge their brother! And what a judgment must that be!

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