

Receiving Honor From Men and Not From God

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the spiritual dangers of seeking human approval over God's honor, which ultimately leads to a lack of true faith.

Scripture: Matthew 6:1, John 5:44, Galatians 1:10

Topics: "The Nature of True Faith", "Honor from God vs. Honor from Men"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the dangers of seeking honor from men rather than from God, emphasizing that this mindset leads to spiritual blindness, unbelief, and a contempt for God. He outlines how this state of mind manifests in various behaviors, such as prioritizing human approval over divine approval, and ultimately concludes that true faith is impossible when one is preoccupied with the opinions of others. Finney warns that this common form of depravity can lead to a loss of piety and a corrupted relationship with God, urging believers to seek God's honor above all else.

Transcript

"How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only?" --John 5:44

The discussion of the subject presented in these words will lead me,

I. TO SHOW WHAT IS IMPLIED IN RECEIVING HONOR FROM MEN RATHER THAN FROM GOD:

II. TO ADDUCE THE EVIDENCES OF THIS STATE OF MIND:

III. TO SHOW THAT WHILE THIS STATE OF MIND CONTINUES, FAITH IS IMPOSSIBLE.

I. 1. "Receiving" implies an act of the will. It is not therefore merely approbateness. When a person constitutionally desires the approbation of his fellow-men, and this constitutional desire remains a mere feeling--an involuntary state of the sensibility, and does not lead to any acts of the will aimed towards the attainment of the object sought, no blame can attach to it. This therefore can not be what our Savior intended. He could not complain of this constitutional tendency, and therefore it can not be that he designates this in this language.

2. It implies a will committed to this propensity. The will is devoted to the gratification of this desire. Men seek applause from their fellow-beings, and make it an object--usually a great object, to gain the high

esteem of others of their species.

3. This state of mind implies great spiritual blindness. Men who can prefer the honor of their fellow men to the honor that comes from God only, must be exceedingly blind. Their minds must be in such a state that they really can see nothing relating to God and spiritual things in its true light. If they saw spiritually they would not make so unreasonable, so insane a preference. They must be stone blind to the value of God's approbation--else they could never place the approbation of man above it.

4. It implies unbelief. No man in the exercise of faith could receive honor from men rather than from God. If he believed what the Bible teaches of God and of spiritual things, it would be impossible for him to make such a choice.

5. It also implies contempt for God. No one could prefer man's approbation to God's if he did not really in heart condemn God. This state of mind practically says, Give me the esteem of my fellow-men and I am satisfied; they are of some consequence; their good opinion is worth something; but as for the honor that comes from God only--what is that to me? Why should I care for his good opinion?

Now who does not see that this is really the spirit of contemning God?

II. Evidences of this state of mind.

1. Men are certainly in this state when they are more affected by loss of character with man than with God. This would show of course that they are more solicitous for reputation with man than with God; or which amounts to the same thing, that they love the honor that comes from man more than that which comes from God only.

2. Persons are in this state of mind when they more naturally inquire what man will think of them than what God will; when they are more solicitous to know the former than the latter, and are more anxious about the result. This anxiety reveals one's state of mind on the point in question beyond all doubt.

3. We may know ourselves to be in this state if we do or omit to do any thing from regard to what man will think rather than from regard to what God will think. To be more influenced by man's opinion than by God's--by man's word than by God's word, must be taken as decisive proof of this state of mind. For example, some go to meeting more from regard to what man will think than to what God will think--more to please man than to please God. This is sometimes the case with professed Christians, and in their attendance upon the prayer meeting, as perhaps some of you can testify. Some persons abstain from labor, or from idle gossip on the Sabbath, with their eye more on man than on God. Some students get lessons more from regard to their teachers and classmates than to God. With many, how rare a thing it is to inquire--what will please my God and Father? Who does not see that such can have no faith? that remaining in this state of mind, they can not exercise faith in God.

In the same state of mind, persons will regulate their dress, their habits and manners more to please man than to please God. How much do we see of this?

4. Those are in this state of mind who need the impulse of approbateness to secure the performance of that which they are under obligation to do. Suppose it be the case that regard to God is not enough to induce us to do known duty, but we need also the inducement of human praise or human esteem, what does this prove, if not that we seek the honor that comes from men and are not satisfied with that which comes from God only? When our regard for God is thus impotent as a motive to duty, it proves most

conclusively that the heart is set upon the honor that comes from man.

5. On the same principle when we find that we need this stimulus to make us omit anything that should be omitted, we have the same praise-loving state of heart revealed. It is often the case that persons will neither do nor omit things which duty and God demand, but which public sentiment forbids. Men need the spur of public sentiment to induce action, or to dissuade from action as the case may be; which shows an exceedingly corrupt state of mind--one over which God has no practical sway whatever.

6. Another proof of this state of mind is, that persons are deeply affected either by the applause or the censure of men. Paul could say--"It is a small thing for me to be judged by man's judgment;"--so all-controlling was his regard for God's judgment, it left small scope for the influence of man's judgment. In fact who does not see that in the nature of the case it is of comparatively small account either way, whether man approves or disapproves; and a man who had proper faith in God and in spiritual things can never be greatly affected one way or the other by man's opinions. He will make this his main inquiry--Will this course please God? Who of you that have known by experience what it is to be drawn into deep communion with God, has not felt most impressively that the opinions of man are light as a feather? You have been lifted entirely above being affected by the applause or the frowns of men.

7. Decisive proof of the state condemned in our text is afforded when we suffer either the private judgment or public sentiment of men to restrain us from obeying God. In such case we may know that our regard for God is not supreme, and that it is impossible we should have faith.

8. Equally so when we conform outwardly to those duties which are popular with men, and neglect those which are not enforced by public sentiment. Often men will be punctual in duties sustained by public sentiment, but negligent in duties not thus sustained. For example, a man will violate the Sabbath in private, by reading books which he knows are unsuitable for that day, or in conversation which disqualifies the mind for the worship of God, when still he would by no means go abroad on the Sabbath, or in any way be known publicly as disregarding its sacred claims. Many will write such letters on the Sabbath as they would not have it known were written on that day, and many letters written on the Sabbath are dated either Saturday or on Monday. They are not ashamed to have God know their sins--only let it be hid from human view.

9. We evince the same state of mind if we refuse to avow ourselves the friends of God because such avowal would be unpopular with men. Persons may be in such circumstances that to avoid odium they will conceal the fact of their being professors of religion, or the fact of their holding some sentiments not generally popular; and this they do because they are far more afraid of injuring their popularity with men than with God. How wrong! How deeply corrupt before God must such a heart be!

10. We evince the same spirit whenever we seek to connect ourselves with those families, churches, societies, or institutions which will increase our popularity with men and not with God. For example, in cities, on this principle men will go to the most popular churches. Students will go to the most popular institutions, and in both cases the question is not--Which course will most please God?--but, which will be the most popular with men? In the same way, men will seek to form connections with families so as to augment their popularity with men, not their acceptance with God.

On the same principle men will avoid connections and associations which will only raise them in God's esteem, and not in man's. Suppose God is building up a church and men are afraid to join it because it is unpopular. If you understand the case as it is, and choose to avoid unpopularity among men rather than

incur odium and reproach for Christ's sake, how clearly do you show what spirit you are of? I knew the case of a man of a very aristocratic spirit, a member of the Presbyterian church, who became ultimately converted, and his conversion was a real turning. He came square round; would go to church among the poor, among the people of color, among the most despised classes of society, and among those only. He said to me, "Going among these classes I feel a great deal more in my place, and my worship of God is far sweeter to me there. It is my very life to go and try to elevate those classes. I love to help them--to encourage them and give them all the countenance and sympathy I can. I love to go, said he, to that colored congregation; there is a blessed revival among them, and there I find men looking in the simplicity of their hearts for the approbation of God. There is none of that stiffness there which encumbers me among the aristocrats of the city."

11. We show the same spirit when we have more regard to outward appearance than to the state of our hearts before God. Take for example, any person in this house who has more regard to outward appearance before men than to inward appearance before God. You have taken more pains in your morning preparation to commend yourself outwardly to men than inwardly to God; have spent more time before your mirror than on your knees; have looked more carefully to your person and your dress than to your heart; ah, you come into God's house as a mocker, to insult God! You profess to worship him, but in heart you worship the congregation, or perhaps, yourself! And must not this be an abomination to God?

12. Again, when persons have more regard to their manner and behavior in the sight of God, and the question with them is--not, what will God think of us, but what will men think? then all is corrupt in heart.

13. Also when men allow themselves to practice any secret sin which they would be ashamed to practice before men, they reveal their own hearts as loving the praise and fearing the censure of man more than God.

14. Again, if we do not sooner blush and hang our heads to find our hearts impure before God than we should to appear in the most disgusting exposure before men, we show that we have more regard to man's esteem than to God's. If we can be ashamed of anything which men disapprove, but can be backslidden before God and not be ashamed of it, we are certainly in a state in which we can not be saved.

15. When we feel the necessity of human applause to prompt us to the performance of any duty; as for example, if a wife needs the stimulus of a husband's applause to prevent her from neglecting her duties; or the husband needs his wife's applause to quicken him in his duties; or when a student needs the impulse of his teacher's praise to make him study, or the stimulus of commencement and of college honors to crowd him along so as to make even commendable progress; these cases and such as these evince that man's esteem is held before God's. When such stimuli are needed to induce proper application to study, all is wrong. When men need these or similar appliances to induce right action, where are they? What state of mind are they in?

16. When it is natural for us to conceive of action produced by such motives as right, we show ourselves to have entirely false views of the real nature of right and wrong. In fact if we can look upon such a state of mind otherwise than with loathing, we show that our hearts are far indeed from estimating things by the right standard. Suppose a student should come to me and I should see that he must have my applause or he would not study, could I regard him as a Christian? While I see that these are the considerations and appliances needed to prompt him along, and that he is influenced by applause only, can I have confidence

in his piety? Can he afford me any evidence that his heart is with God? Must I not disapprove, nay, even loathe his spirit?

17. So if we are in a state of mind in which we can think of securing any real good to others by such appliances; if we can suppose that by such a course we can either promote their piety or their real usefulness, we are ourselves entirely out of the way. Nothing could show more conclusively that we have missed the true idea of supreme regard for God.

III. While this state of mind continues faith is impossible.

1. This is asserted in the text. The question of our Savior implies the strongest form of negation. He could not more pointedly have said--It is impossible for you who receive honor one of another to have faith.

2. The state of mind implied in our text is the very opposite of faith. Faith commits the will to God and implies a supreme regard to God's views, opinions and applause. Of course it is as widely contrasted with the state of receiving honor from men rather than from God, as it can be.

3. The state of mind here described is a committal to gratify a propensity and must therefore be a state of total depravity. What less can you say of the man who prefers honor from men to honor from God?

4. It is therefore naturally impossible to believe, and yet indulge in this state of mind. The state which prefers human applause and the state of the true believer are fundamentally opposed to each other and can never co-exist in the same mind. There is therefore ample ground in the very constitution and nature of things for the strong negation implied in the question put by our Lord--"How can ye believe who receive honor one of another and seek not the honor that comes from God only?"

REMARKS.

1. This is one of the most common forms of total depravity. This giving up the mind to be influenced more by man than by God--more by man's opinions than by God's, is exceedingly common and the propensity to it seems to be amazingly strong. Therefore this propensity, more than any other, takes the control of the will. Hence few things will excite more pain or more pleasure than those which affect reputation. How many a young woman--professed Christians too--would almost go deranged if she supposed her reputation were suffering, and yet she cares not for God's disapprobation! How many young men would almost die if they felt themselves disgraced; if they saw themselves expelled from the Institution; while yet they are very little, if at all affected by God's known displeasure! O what a state of mind is this!

2. Yet this state of mind is often regarded as scarcely one of depravity at all. So far from being thought to be total depravity, it is by many scarcely deemed a sin. Men will show by their language and conduct that they have more respect for the esteem of men than of God, and yet they think this quite consistent with a profession of religion. This is in their view altogether a venial fault if indeed it be a fault at all. They would be astounded if you were to assure them that such a state of mind disproves Christian character. They have never dreamed any such thing.

3. Multitudes who profess religion are totally blind in this matter. Some are given up to one form of self-seeking and some to another; but almost none of them attribute this to total depravity. Are they not totally blind in these things? How can men be religious while their will is given up to selfishness? Surely this state is precisely the opposite of religion.

4. How few know what it is to renounce the world in the sense of renouncing all undue regard to its opinions and its honors, and giving themselves wholly to God. We sometimes see a case of this sort in which a Christian does really break the yoke of sin and selfishness--but how rare! Yet in no other cases have we the proof that persons are truly religious.

5. Many of the most endearing and important relations of life are perverted by selfishness and thus become a snare to souls. For example, the marriage relation. Many women feel worse to lose the affections of their husband than to lose the love of God. They will wander far, very far away from God, and incur his certain and sore displeasure; yet it gives them scarcely the least possible anxiety or pain; but these same persons at the same time may be tremblingly alive to the opinions of their husbands! Oh, if they could only please their husbands? But you see no manifestations of strong desire to please God.

The same thing is often true of husbands towards their wives. So in all the various relations of life. They are abused and perverted by the selfishness of men. Designed by our Creator for our social happiness, they are so perverted as to become a great temptation to idolatrous affection and regard; then of course, God is disesteemed and forgotten, and the most fatal effects of human depravity are the natural results.

I have often thought that we as a people in this place have greatly erred in the way of too much regard to men's opinions. We began here a small and unknown people. No sooner did we become in some measure known than our names began to cast out as evil. There were many reasons why we should be opposed, some of which were to us unavoidable. But into this subject I need not now enter. I can not however forbear to remark that there has been a manifest desire here for a long time past to conform so far to the course of other institutions as to get back to popular favor. It can not be denied that there has been such a desire manifested here, nor that it has been somewhat general. There has been a tendency to turn and tack, and haul up to the wind of popular favor so as to avoid being reproached by those whom we can not regard as being God's people and in sympathy with God. Now so far as we would do this, we are backsliders from God--real apostates from the God we have professed to love and obey. We ought to know and consider that the world is no more friendly to God than it used to be. In this world, said Christ to his real disciples, ye shall have tribulation. If we will be his unswerving disciples and followers, we have no more right to expect that we can escape public odium than that Christ could.

I am not now saying that we should excite public odium causelessly, or recklessly; but we should seek God's approbation supremely, and then leave all results to his over-ruling providence.

6. In the light of our subject we see the great secret of the loss of piety among students. It is a notorious fact that students, instead of rising are apt to degenerate in their piety. I know there are exceptions, but they are only exceptions, and solitary ones too. James B. Taylor was one, and for this reason he was the butt of ridicule in his class. Just because he sustained and developed his piety, was he unpopular with his class-mates--though far indeed from being unpopular with God.

How shall we account for this fact of general declension in the piety of students? We can not ascribe it to the nature of their studies. It can not lie either in the mental exercise and discipline itself, nor in the kind of studies pursued usually in college. It must therefore lie in the motives under which study is pursued. The fearful fact is--students become ambitious. They have their eye on college honors; indeed not only their eye, but their earnest heart. To deny this were to deny one of the plainest matters of fact. Who does not know that they often manifest this to an odious extent? There may be more or less of the appearance of piety manifested in various ways along with this strong manifestation of ambition, but what then? How can

ambition and pure religion come into sympathy and union with each other? If those students were to study nothing but the Bible, and yet do this for the sake of making a great commencement speech to show themselves off superbly, who does not see that there would be no piety at all in this? Suppose they studied Hebrew or Theology for such an end, could you say they had profited much by those studies, pursued for such objects?

7. This same form of ambition is the ruin of many ministers. They get this spirit in college, carry it into the Theological Seminary, and out of the Seminary into their pulpit, and so on perhaps through life. And who does not know that an ambitious minister is the next-door neighbor to the devil? Who in all the earth does more of Satan's work than he, or does it up to better advantage for his employer?

Now why should not an ambitious life be the result of such a course of training through the college and through the seminary? Why should not such causes produce such results? Is it strange?

I do not by any means say that college honors were intended for this end, but I do say that these are the results naturally, usually, and most deplorably. No wonder these results should distress the truly spiritual portion of the church, and grieve the intelligent and pious patrons of literary institutions. I have good reason to know that they do. I can see why they should.

8. Every body feels that it is a dreadful sin for a minister to seek applause. Who does not feel this? Who does not know that he should himself oppose a minister whom he had reason to believe ambitious? You see a man evidently preaching from ambitious motives, seeking honor from men more than from God; you mark him, and notice how his ambition works itself out every where--in the shape of his sermon, in his manner in the pulpit, and his manner out of the pulpit; in his remarks about himself and his inquires after praise;--seeing this and such things as these, you would cry out against him--Hypocrite! wretch! how can you desecrate God's sanctuary and altar by such a heart as yours!

But thou that condemnest another, beware lest thou also condemn thyself. Seeking honor from man more than from God is just as bad in other men as in gospel ministers:--is just as wicked in other employments as in the gospel ministry. A man in any sphere who allows himself to do the same things is just as odious to God as the minister is, and so would be the woman also who should do the same, and possess the same spirit.

9. Many persons at great pains educate their children more for the sake of elevating them in the world than for raising them in the esteem and favor of God. Many educate themselves for the same end, on the same principles. How dreadful that persons should educate either themselves or their children for sin and for moral ruin.

10. As long as young men study ambitiously, we need not expect a thoroughly consecrated, self-denying, and God-honoring ministry. Education has too much power to admit of results so unlike its own tendencies. Train your men ambitiously during their years of study, and you can expect nothing better than an ambitious life.

11. Students so trained, come gradually to lose a sense of the wickedness of this state of mind. They cease to realize how wicked it is to be more influenced by man than by God. They come gradually under this influence; but when once it has gained the ascendancy in their hearts, they carry it with them to the last moment of commencement day; then they go right off with it to some theological seminary, and perhaps will select their seminary with special reference to their own ambitious ends, preferring that which

will give them most eclat. No wonder this spirit of ambition follows them from the seminary into the ministry, and through their ministry to their very grave!

12. When a student is seen to be in such a state, instructors ought to have their eye on him, and ought to bring influences to bear upon him to save him if possible before the strength of habit becomes too strong to be overcome--too rigid to be cured. Especially should councils and all bodies which exercise the function of granting license to preach, be peculiarly watchful if called to examine for licensure a candidate who is manifestly ambitious. No such candidate ought ever to be admitted into the ministry--no, never! Their influence in it can not fail of being fearfully pernicious.

13. A great many persons it is to be feared are keeping up the form of religion before men, while they know themselves to have no communion with God. They may attend worship in their families--but to be seen of men rather than to be accepted of God. They go through the forms of sabbath worship--their eye on man and not towards God. If they are unblemished in their moral life, it is from regard to their own reputation, lest they should incur the censure of the church and be seen to be really wicked before men. Perhaps they will even pray in public for the sake of their reputation among men, while they know that God regards it as an abomination. Ah, sometimes such men go and pray when the very midnight of the pit is not blacker than their hearts! Horrible!

You can easily see why so many complain of coldness and unbelief. No wonder there is unbelief in your hearts. "How can ye believe who receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only?" While you turn your back upon God, how can you expect any thing better than that He will turn his face away from you? Could you even respect Him if He did not manifest self-respect enough to do this?

O then, cease ye from man! Cease to regard man as one whose opinions should affect you, and control your conduct or your heart. O how many are in bondage to public sentiment--a bondage fatal to their peace with God--fatal to their exercising faith in God--fatal--alas! in multitudes of cases to the final salvation of their souls!

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