

Religion of the Law and Gospel

by Charles Finney

The sermon highlights the difference between the religion of law and the religion of faith, emphasizing that the gospel does not cancel or set aside the obligations of the moral law, but rather influences obedience from love.

Scripture: Romans 9:30

Topics: "Faith vs. Legalism", "True Obedience"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the critical distinction between the religion of the law and the religion of faith, arguing that true righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ rather than through adherence to the law. He explains that both Jews and Gentiles have always been justified by faith, but the Jews stumbled by relying on the law instead of faith. Finney illustrates that the gospel does not lessen the moral law's demands but rather fulfills them through love and genuine obedience. He warns against legalism, which relies on fear and obligation, contrasting it with the liberating love that characterizes true faith. Ultimately, he challenges listeners to examine their own faith and ensure it is rooted in love rather than mere legalistic duty.

Transcript

TEXT.--"What shall we say then? That the Gentiles which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith: but Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling-stone; as it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumbling-stone, and rock of offense: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed."--Rom. ix. 30-33.

IN the Epistle to the Romans, the apostle pursues a systematic course of reasoning, to accomplish a particular design. In the beginning of it, he proves that not only the Gentiles, but the Jews also, were in a state of entire depravity; and that the Jews were not, as they vainly imagined, naturally holy. He then introduces the Moral Law, and by explaining it shows that by works of law no flesh could be saved. His next topic is Justification by Faith, in opposition to Justification by Law. Here I will observe, in passing, that it is my design to make this the subject of my next lecture. The next subject, with which he begins chap. 6, is to show that sanctification is by faith; or that all true religion, all the acceptable obedience there ever was in the world, is based on faith. In the eighth and ninth chapters, he introduces the subject of divine sovereignty; and in the last part of the ninth chapter, he sums up the whole matter, and asks, "What shall

we say, then?" What shall we say of all this?--That the Gentiles, who never thought of the law, have become pious, and obtained the holiness which is by faith; but the Jews, attempting it by the law, have entirely failed. Wherefore? Because they made the fatal mistake of attempting to become pious by obeying the law, and have always come short, while the Gentiles have obtained true religion, by faith in Jesus Christ.--Jesus Christ is here called "that stumbling-stone," because the Jews were so opposed to him. But whosoever believeth in him shall not be confounded.

My design to-night is, to point out as distinctly as I can, the true distinction between the religion of law and the religion of faith. I shall proceed in the following order:

I. Show in what the distinction does not consist.

II. Show in what it does consist. And

III. Bring forward some specimens of both, to show more plainly in what they differ.

I. I am to show in what the distinction between the religion of law and the religion of faith does not consist.

1. The difference does not lie in the fact, that under the law men were justified by works, without faith. The method of salvation in both dispensations has been the same. Sinners were always justified by faith. The Jewish dispensation pointed to a Savior to come, and if men were saved at all, it was by faith in Christ. And sinners now are saved in the same way.

2. Not in the fact that the gospel has cancelled or set aside the obligations of the moral law. It is true, it has set aside the claims of the ceremonial law, or law of Moses. The ceremonial law was nothing but a set of types pointing to the Savior, and was set aside, of course, when the great ante-type appeared. It is now generally admitted by all believers, that the gospel has not set aside the moral law. But that doctrine has been maintained in different ages of the church. Many have maintained that the gospel has set aside the moral law, so that believers are under no obligation to obey it. Such was the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, so severely reprobated by Christ. The Antinomians, in the days of the apostles and since, believed that they were without any obligation to obey the moral law; and held that Christ's righteousness was so imputed to believers, and that he had so fulfilled the law for them, that they were under no obligation to obey it themselves.

There have been many, in modern times, called Perfectionists, who held that they were not under obligation to obey the law. They suppose that Christ has delivered them from the law, and given them the Spirit, and that the leadings of the Spirit are now to be their rule of life, instead of the law of God. Where the Bible says, sin shall not have dominion over believers, these persons understand by it, that the same acts, which would be sin if done by an unconverted person, are not sin in them. The others, they say, are under the law, and so bound by its rules, but themselves are sanctified, and are in Christ, and if they break the law it is no sin. But all such notions must be radically wrong. God has no right to give up the moral law. He cannot discharge us from the duty of love to God and love to man, for this is right in itself. And unless God will alter the whole moral constitution of the universe, so as to make that right which is wrong, he cannot give up the claims of the moral law. Besides, this doctrine represents Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost as having taken up arms openly against the government of God.

3. The distinction between law religion and gospel religion does not consist in the fact that the gospel is any less strict in its claims, or allows any greater latitude of self-indulgence than the law. Not only does the

gospel not cancel the obligations of the moral law, but it does in no degree abate them. Some people talk about gospel liberty; as though they had got a new rule of life, less strict, and allowing more liberty than the law. I admit that it has provided a new method of justification, but it every where insists that the rule of life is the same with the law. The very first sentence of the gospel, the command to repent, is in effect a re-enactment of the law, for it is a command to return to obedience. The idea that the liberty of the gospel differs from the liberty of the law, is erroneous.

4. Neither does the distinction consist in the fact that those called legalists, or who have a legal religion, do, either by profession or in fact, depend on their own works for justification. It is not often the case, at least in our day, that legalists do profess dependence on their own works, for there are few so ignorant as not to know that this is directly in the face of the gospel. Nor is it necessarily the case that they really depend on their own works. Often they really depend on Christ for salvation. But their dependence is false dependence, such as they have no right to have. They depend on him, but they make it manifest that their faith, or dependence, is not that which actually "worketh by love," or that "purifieth the heart," or that "overcometh the world." It is a simple matter of fact, that the faith which they have does not do what the faith does which men must have in order to be saved, and so it is not the faith of the gospel. They have a kind of faith, but not that kind that makes men real Christians, and brings them under the terms of the gospel.

II. I am to mention some of the particulars in which these two kinds of religion differ.

There are several different classes of persons who manifestly have a legal religion. There are some who really profess to depend on their own works for salvation. Such were the Pharisees. The Hicksite Quakers formerly took this ground, and maintained that men were to be justified by works; setting aside entirely justification by faith. When I speak of works, I mean works of law. And here I want you to distinguish between works of law and works of faith. This is the grand distinction to be kept in view. It is between works produced by legal considerations, and those produced by faith. There are but two principles on which obedience to any government can turn: One is the principle of hope and fear, under the influence of conscience. Conscience points out what is right or wrong, and the individual is induced by hope and fear to obey. The other principle is confidence and love. You see this illustrated in families, where one child always obeys from hope and fear, and another from affectionate confidence. So in the government of God, the only thing that ever produced even the appearance of obedience, is one of these two principles.

There is a multitude of things that address our hopes and fears; such as character, interest, heaven and hell, &c. These may produce external obedience, or conformity to the law. But filial confidence leads men to obey God from love. This is the only obedience that is acceptable to God. God not only requires a certain course of conduct, but that this should spring from love. There never was and never can be, in the government of God, any acceptable obedience but the obedience of faith. Some suppose that faith will be done away in heaven. This is a strange notion! As if there were no occasion to trust God in heaven, or no reason to exercise confidence in him. Here is the great distinction between the religion of law and gospel religion. Legal obedience is influenced by hope and fear, and is hypocritical, selfish, outward, constrained. Gospel obedience is from love, and is sincere, free, cheerful, true. There is a class of legalists, who depend on works of law for justification, who have merely deified what they call a principle of right, and have set themselves to do right; it is not out of respect to the law of God, or out of love to God, but just because it is right.

There is another distinction here. The religion of law is the religion of purposes, or desires, founded on legal considerations, and not the religion of preference, or love to God. The individual intends to put off his sins; he purposes to obey God and be religious; but his purpose does not grow out of love to God, but out of hope and fear. It is easy to see that a purpose, founded on such considerations, is very different from a purpose growing out of love. But the religion of the gospel is not a purpose merely, but an actual preference consisting in love.

Again, there is a class of legalists that depend on Christ, but their dependence is not gospel dependence, because the works which it produces are works of law; that is, from hope and fear, not from love. Gospel dependence may produce, perhaps, the very same outward works, but the motives are radically different. The legalist drags on a painful, irksome, moral, and perhaps, outwardly, religious life. The gospel believer has an affectionate confidence in God, which leads him to obey out of love. His obedience is prompted by his own feelings. Instead of being dragged to duty, he goes to it cheerfully, because he loves it, and doing it is a delight to his soul.

There is another point. The legalist expects to be justified by faith, but he has not learned that he must be sanctified by faith. I propose to examine this point another time, in full. Modern legalists do not expect to be justified by works; they know these are inadequate--they know that the way to be saved is by Christ. But they have no practical belief that justification by faith is only true, as sanctification by faith is true, and that men are justified by faith only, as they are first sanctified by faith. And therefore, while they expect to be justified by faith, they set themselves to perform works that are works of law.

Again: I wish you to observe that the two classes may agree in these points; the necessity of good works, and, theoretically, in what constitutes good works; that is, obedience springing from love to God. And further, they may agree in aiming to perform good works of this kind. But the difference lies here; in the different influences to which they look, to enable them to perform good works. The considerations by which they expect their minds to be affected, are different. They look to different sources for motives. And the true Christian alone succeeds in actually performing good works. The legalist, aiming to perform good works, influenced by hope and fear, and a selfish regard to his own interest, obeying the voice of conscience because he is afraid to do otherwise, falls entirely short of loving God with all his heart, and soul, and strength. The motives under which he acts have no tendency to bring him to the obedience of love. The true Christian, on the contrary, so appreciates God, so perceives and understands God's character, in Christ, as begets such an affectionate confidence in God, that he finds it easy to obey from love. Instead of finding it, as a hymn has strangely represented,

"Hard to obey, and harder still to love,"

he finds it no hardship at all. The commandments are not grievous. The yoke is easy, and the burden light. And he finds the ways of wisdom to be ways of pleasantness, and all her paths to be peace.

Is it so with most professors of religion? Is it so with YOU? Do you feel, in your religious duties, constrained by love? Are you drawn by such strong cords of love, that it would give you more trouble to omit duty than to obey? Do your affections flow out in such a strong current to God, that you cannot but obey? How is it with those individuals who find it "hard to obey, and harder still to love?" What is the matter? Ask that wife who loves her husband, if she finds it hard to try to please her husband? Suppose she answers, in a solemn tone, "O yes, I find it hard to obey and harder still to love my husband," what would the husband think? What would any one of you who are parents say, if you should hear one of your

children complaining, "I find it harder to obey my father, and harder still to love?" The truth is, there is a radical defect in the religion of those people who love such expressions and live as if they were true. If any of you find religion a painful thing, rely on it, you have the religion of the law. Did you ever find it a painful thing to do what you love to do? No. It is a pleasure to do it. The religion of the gospel is no labor to them that exercise it. It is the feeling of the heart. What would you do in heaven, if religion is such a painful thing here?--Suppose you were taken to heaven and obliged to grind out just so much religion every week, and month and year, to eternity. What sort of a heaven would it be to you? Would it be heaven, or would it be hell?--If you were required to have ten thousand times as much as you have here, and your whole life were to be filled up with this, and nothing else to do or enjoy but an eternal round of just such duties, would not hell itself be a respite to you?

The difference, then, lies here. One class are striving to be religious from hope and fear, and under the influence of conscience which lashes them if they do not do their duty. The other class act from love to God, and the impulses of their own feelings, and know what the text means, which says, "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it on their hearts, I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

III. I will give some specimens of these two classes, by way of illustration.

The first example I shall give is that of the apostle Paul, as he has recorded it in the 7th of Romans, where he exhibits the struggle to obey the law, under the influence of law alone. [Here Mr. Finney proceeded, at considerable length, to comment on the 7th chapter of Romans, but as he has since concluded to give a separate lecture on that subject, these remarks are omitted here. He showed how Paul had struggled, and labored, under the motives of law, until he absolutely despaired of help from that quarter; and how, when the gospel was brought to view, the chain was broken, and he found it easy to obey. He then proceeded:]

You may see the same in the experience of almost any convicted sinner, after he has become truly converted. He was convicted, the law was brought home to his mind, he struggled to fulfill the law, he was in agony, and then he was filled with joy and glory. Why? He was agonized under the law, he had no rest and no satisfaction, he tried to please God by keeping the law, he went about in pain all the day, he read the Bible, he tried to pray; but the Spirit of God was upon him, showing him his sins, and he had no relief. The more he attempts to help himself the deeper he sinks in despair. All the while, his heart is cold and selfish. But now let another principle be introduced, and let him be influenced by love to God. The same Holy Spirit is upon him, showing him the same sins that grieved and distressed him so before. But now he goes on his knees, his tears flow like water as he confesses his guilt, and his heart melts in joyful relentings, such as cannot be described, but easily understood by them that have felt it. Now he engages in performing the same duties that he tried before. But, O, how changed! The Spirit of God has broken his chains, and now he loves God and is filled with joy and peace in believing.

The same thing is seen in many professors of religion, who find religion a painful thing. They have much conviction, and perhaps much of what they call religion, but their minds are chiefly filled with doubts and fears, doubts and fears, all the time. By and by, perhaps, that same professor will come out, all at once, a different character. His religion now is not all complaints and sighs, but the love of God fills his heart, and he goes cheerfully and happily to his duty; and his soul is so light and happy in God, that he floats in an ocean of love and joy, and the peace that fills him is like a river.

Here, then, is the difference between the slavery of law and the liberty of the gospel. The liberty of the gospel does not consist in being freed from doing what the law requires, but in a man's being in such a

state of mind that doing it is itself a pleasure, instead of a burden. What is the difference between slavery and freedom? The slave serves because he is obliged to do so, the freeman serves from choice. The man who is under the bondage of law does duty because conscience thunders in his ears if he does not obey, and he hopes to go to heaven if he does. The man who is in the liberty of the gospel does the same things because he loves to do them. One is influenced by selfishness, the other by disinterested benevolence.

REMARKS.

I. You can easily see, that if we believe the words and actions of most professors of religion, they have made a mistake; and that they have the religion of law, and not gospel religion. They are not constrained by the love of Christ, but moved by hopes and fears, and by the commandments of God. They have gone no farther in religion than to be convicted sinners. Within the last year, I have witnessed the regeneration of so many professors of religion, that I am led to fear that great multitudes in the church are yet under the law; and although they profess to depend on Christ for salvation, their faith is not that which works by love.

II. Some persons are all faith, without works. These are Antinomians. Others are all works and no faith. These are Legalists. In all ages of the church, men have inclined first to one of these extremes, and then over to the other. Sometimes they are settled down on their lees, pretending to be all faith, and waiting God's time. Then they get roused up and dash on in works, without regard to the motive from which they act.

III. You see the true character of those professors of religion who are for ever crying out "Legality!" as soon as they are pressed up to holiness. When I first began to preach, I found this spirit in many places; so that the moment Christians were urged up to duty, the cry would rise, This is legal preaching, do preach the gospel; salvation is by faith, not by duty; you ought to comfort saints, not to distress them. All this was nothing but rank Antinomianism.

On the other hand, the same class of churches now complain, if you preach faith to them, and show them what is the true nature of gospel faith. They now want to do something, and insist that no preaching is good that does not excite them, and stir them up to good works. They are all for doing, doing, doing, and will be dissatisfied with preaching that discriminates between true and false faith, and urges obedience of the heart, out of love to God. The Antinomians wait for God to produce right feelings in them. The Legalists undertake to get right feelings by going to work. It is true that going to work is the way, when the church feels right, to perpetuate and cherish right feelings. But it is not the way to get right feeling, in the first place, to dash right into work, without any regard to the motives of the heart.

IV. Real Christians are a stumbling block to both parties; to those who wait God's time and do nothing, and to those who bustle about with no faith. The true Christian acts under such a love to God and to his fellow men, and he labors to pull sinners out of the fire with such earnestness, that the waiting party cry out, "O, he is getting up an excitement; he is going to work in his own strength; he don't believe in the necessity of divine influences; we ought to feel our dependence; let us wait God's time, and not try to get up a revival without God." So they sit down and fold their hands, and sing, "We feel our dependence, we feel our dependence; wait God's time; we don't trust in our own works." On the other hand, the legalists when once they get roused to bustle about, will not see but their religion is the same with the real Christian. They make as strenuous outward efforts, and suppose themselves to be actuated by the same spirit.

You will rarely see a revival, in which this does not show itself. If the body of the church are awakened to duty, and have the spirit of prayer and zeal for the conversion of sinners, there will be some who sit still

and complain that the church are depending on their own strength, and others very busy and noisy, but without any feeling; while the third class are so full of love and compassion to sinners that they can hardly eat or sleep, and yet so humble and tender that you would imagine they felt themselves to be nothing. The legalist, with his dry zeal, makes a great noise, deceives himself, perhaps, and thinks he is acting just like a Christian. But mark! The true Christian is stirring and active in the service of Christ, but moves with the holy fire that burns within his own bosom. The legalist depends on some protracted meeting, or some other influence from without, to excite him to do his duty.

V. You see why the religion of some persons is so steady and uniform, and that of others, is so fitful and evanescent. You will find some individuals, who seem to be always engaged in religion. Talk to them any time, on the subject, and their souls will kindle. Others are awake only now and then. Once in a while you may find them full of zeal. The truth is, when one has the anointing that abides, he has something that is durable. But if his religion is only that of the law, he will have only just so much of it as he has of conviction at the present moment, and his religion will be fitful and evanescent, of course.

VI. You see why some are so anxious to get to heaven, while others are so happy here. There are some, who have such a love for souls, and such a desire to have Christ's kingdom built up on earth, that they are perfectly happy here, and willing to live and labour for God, as long as he chooses to have them. Nay, if they were sent to hell, and permitted to labor there for souls, they would be happy. While others talk as if people were never to expect true enjoyment in this life; but when they get to heaven, they expect to be happy. One class have no enjoyment but in hope. The other has already the reality, the very substance of heaven begun in the soul.

Now, beloved, I have as particularly as I could in the time, pointed out to you the distinction between the religion of the law and the religion of the gospel. And now, what religion have you? True religion is always the same, and consists in disinterested love to God and man. Have you that kind of religion? Or have you the kind that consists, not in disinterested love, but in the pursuit of happiness as the great end. Which have you? The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace.--There is no condemnation of such religion. But if any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his.--Now, don't make a mistake here, and suffer yourselves to go down to hell with a lie in your right hand, because you have the religion of the law. The Jews failed here, while the Gentiles attained true holiness by the gospel. O, how many are deceived, and are acting under legal considerations, while they know nothing of the real religion of the gospel!

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