

Religion or Saving Faith

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney's sermon emphasizes that true faith is rooted in love and obedience to God's moral law, contrasting it with the legalistic approach that relies on works alone.

Scripture: Romans 9:30

Topics: "Faith vs. Legalism", "The Nature of True Obedience"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the distinction between religion based on law and saving faith in Christ, illustrating how the Gentiles attained righteousness through faith while the Jews failed by relying on the law. He argues that true obedience stems from love and faith, not from fear or legalistic adherence to rules. Finney warns against the dangers of legalism and antinomianism, urging believers to embrace a faith that works through love. He highlights that the moral law remains essential, and genuine Christianity is characterized by a heartfelt love for God and others. Ultimately, he calls for a faith that transforms the heart and leads to joyful obedience.

Transcript

"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 the stumblingstone; As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offense: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed" --Romans 9:30-33

In the epistle to the Romans, Paul systematically proves that not only the Gentiles but the Jews were in a state of entire depravity. He then introduces the moral law., explaining it shows that works of the law cannot save man's soul. Sanctification, or holiness, is by faith, and all acceptable obedience is based on faith.

In the eighth and ninth chapters, he introduces the subject of divine sovereignty. Then, in the last part of the ninth chapter, he sums up the whole matter and asks, "What shall we say, then?" The Gentiles, who never thought of the law, had become pious and obtained the holiness which is by faith; but the Jews, attempting it by the law, had entirely failed. Why? Because they made the fatal mistake of attempting to become pious by obeying the law and had come short, while the Gentiles became righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is here called "that stumblingstone" because the Jews were opposed to Him.

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

GOD'S MORAL GOVERNMENT

The gospel has not canceled or set aside the obligations of the moral law. 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 when the great ante-type appeared.

Many people maintain 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, who were severely rebuked by Christ (See Rev 2). The Antinomians, in the days of the apostles, believed that they were without any obligation to obey the moral law. They held that Christ's righteousness was imputed to believers. Since He had fulfilled the law for them, they were under no obligation to obey it themselves.

In modern times, Perfectionists have 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. They believe the leadings of the Spirit are now their rule of life instead of God's law. The Bible says that sin will not have dominion over believers, but these people think the same acts that would be sin if done by an unconverted person are not sin in them.

All such notions are 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. Unless God alters the whole moral constitution of the universe 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 Spirit as having taken up arms openly against the government of God.

Some people talk about gospel liberty as though they had a new rule of life allowing more liberty than the law. The gospel has provided a new method of justification, but it 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 reenactment of the law. It is a command to return to obedience. The idea that the liberty of the gospel differs from the liberty of the law is absurd.

Legalists depend on their own works for justification either by profession or in fact. If they do depend on Christ for salvation, their dependence is a false dependence. They depend on Him, but their faith doesn't work by love, purify the heart, or overcome the world. They have a kind of faith, but not the kind that makes men real Christians and brings them under the terms of the gospel.

LEGAL OBEDIENCE AND LOVE

Several different classes of people have a legal religion. Some profess to depend on their won works for salvation. Such were the Pharisees. I want you to distinguish between works of law and works of faith. This is the main distinction to remember--some works are produced by legal considerations and some are produced by faith.

Two principles can produce obedience to any government. 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. In the government of God, the only thing that ever produced even the appearance of obedience is one of these two principles.

A multitude of things address our hopes and fears, such as character, interest, heaven and hell, ect. These may produce external obedience or conformity of the law. But filial confidence leads men to obey God from love. This is the only obedience that is acceptable to God. God requires a certain course of conduct, and it 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 people think that faith will be done away with in heaven, as if there will be 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 Christianity: Legal obedience is influenced by hope and fear and is hypocritical, selfish, outward, and constrained. Gospel obedience is from love and is sincere, free, cheerful, and true. Legalists depend on works of law for justification, defying what they call a principle of right and setting themselves to do right--not out of respect to the law of God or out of love to God but just because it is right.

The religion of law is the religion of purpose or desires founded on legal considerations and not the religion of preference or love to God. The individual intends to put off his sins and purposes to obey God and be religious. His purpose does not grow out of love to God but out of hope and fear. A purpose founded on such considerations is very different from a purpose growing out of love. Christianity is not a mere purpose but an actual preference consisting in love.

Some Legalists depend on Christ, but their dependence is not gospel dependence because the works that it produces are works of law from hope and fear. Gospel dependence may produce the very same outward works, but the motives are radically different. The Legalist drags on a painful, inksome, moral and outwardly religious life. The gospel believer has an affectionate confidence in God that 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 love it, and doing it is a delight to his soul.

The Legalists expects to be justified by faith, but he has not learned that he must be sanctified, or set apart, by faith. Modern Legalists do not expect to be justified by works, for 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 when men are first sanctified by faith. And, therefore, while they expect to be justified by faith, they perform works that are works of law.

JESUS' YOKE OF LOVE

True Christians and Legalists may agree on the necessity of good works and theoretically in what constitutes good works--that is, obedience springing from love to God. They may agree in aiming to perform good works of this kind. But the difference lies in the different influences that enable them to perform good works. The consideration they expect to affect their minds is different. They look to different sources for motives. The true Christian alone succeeds in actually performing good works. The Legalist, aiming to perform good works, is influenced by hope, fear, and a selfish regard to his own interest. He obeys the voice of conscience because he is afraid to do otherwise and falls entirely short of loving God with all his heart, soul, and strength.

The motives under which the Legalist acts have no tendency to bring him to the obedience of love. The true Christian, on the contrary, appreciates God and perceives and understands His character. In Christ he has such an affectionate confidence in God that he finds it easy to obey from love. The commandments are not grievous. The yoke is easy and the burden light. He finds the ways of wisdom to be ways of pleasantness, and all her paths to be peace. (See Proverbs 3:17)

Is it so with you? Do you feel, in your duties, constrained by love? Are you drawn by such strong cords of love that it would give you more trouble to disobey than to do His will? Do your affections flow out in strong currents to God?

What is the matter with individuals who find it hard to obey and harder still to love? Ask the wife who loves her husband if she finds it hard to try to please him? Suppose she answers, in a solemn tone, "Yes, I find it hard to obey and harder still to love my husband." What would her husband think?

What would your parents say if you heard one of your children complaining, "I find it hard to obey my father and harder still to love him"?

A radical defect lies in the religion of people who love such expressions and live as if they were true. If any of you find serving Jesus a painful thing, you have the religion of law. Did you ever find it painful to do what you love to do? No. It is a pleasure to do it.

Christianity is not labor, it is the feeling of the heart. What would you do in heaven if serving God is such a painful thing here? Suppose you were taken to heaven and obliged to grind out religion every week, month, and year throughout eternity. What sort of 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 religion as you have here, and your whole life were to be filled up with such duties, wouldn't hell itself be a relief to you?

One class strives to be religious through hope and fear. Under the influence of conscience, they lash themselves if they don't do their duty. The other class acts from love to God and the impulses of their own feelings. They know what the Scripture means: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33)

You can see this experience in almost any convicted sinner after he has become truly converted. He was convicted, and the law was brought home to his mind. He struggled to fulfill the law. He was in agony, but then he was filled with joy and glory. Why? He agonized under the law. He has no rest and no satisfaction and tried to please God by keeping the law. He went about in pain, read the Bible, and tried to pray. But the Spirit of God was upon him showing him his sins, and he had no relief. The more he attempted to help himself, the deeper he sank in despair. The whole time his heart was cold and selfish.

Now let him be influenced by love to God. The same Holy Spirit is upon him, showing him the same sins that grieved and distress him so before. But now he hits his knees, tears flow like water as he confesses his guilt, and his heart melts. Now he performs the same duties, but what a difference! The Spirit of God has broken his chains, and now he loves and is filled with joy and peace in believing.

FAITH WORKS BY LOVE

Here 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. What is the difference between slavery and freedom? The slave

serves because he has to do so, but the free man serves from choice. The man who is under the bondage of law serves because conscience thunders in his ears if he does not obey, and he hopes to go to heaven if he is obedient. The man who is in the liberty of the gospel serves because he loves to. One is influenced by selfishness, and the other by selfless love.

If we believe the words and actions of most professing Christians, they have made a mistake and have the religion of law. They are not constrained by the love of Christ but moved by hopes, fears, and the commandments of God. They have gone no further than to be convicted sinners. I have witnessed the regeneration of so many false converts that I fear great multitudes in the Church are still under the law. Although they profess to depend on Christ for salvation, their faith does not work by love.

Some people 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 pretend to be all faith, awaiting God's time. Then they get zealous about works, without regard to the motive from which they act.

The true character of these false converts is to cry out, "Legality!" as soon as they are challenged with holiness. When I first began to preach, I found this spirit in many places. The moment Christians were urged to work, the cry would rise, "This is legal preaching. Preach the gospel; salvation is by faith, not by works; you ought to comfort the saints, not distress them." All this was nothing but rank Antinomianism.

On the other hand, the same people now complain if you preach the true nature of gospel faith. Now they want to do something and insist that no preaching is good unless it stirs 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 want to get right feelings by going to work.

Going to work is the way, when the Church feels right, to bring about right feelings. But to dash right out into work without any regard to the motives of the heart is not the way to get right feelings in the first place.

Real Christians are a stumbling block to both parties--to those who wait for God's time and do nothing and to those who bustle about with no faith. The true Christian acts under love to God and his fellowmen, and he labors to pull sinners out of the fire with earnestness.

If the Church is awakened and has the spirit of prayer and zeal for the conversion of sinners, there will be some who sit still and complain that the Church is depending on its own strength. Others will be very busy and noisy but without any feeling. The third class will be so full of love and compassion to sinners that they can hardly eat or sleep, 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, and thinks he is acting just like a Christian. The true Christian is stirring and active in the service of Christ but moves with the holy fire that burns within his own bosom.

Some people's religion is steady and uniform while that of others is fitful and unstable. You will find some individuals always excited about Jesus. Talk to them any time, and their souls will kindle. Others are awake only now and then. Once in a while, you may find them full of zeal. 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 as much of it as he has of conviction at the present moment.

Some are anxious to get to heaven, while others are happy here. True Christians have a love for souls. They have such a desire to have Christ's Kingdom built up on earth that they are perfectly happy to live and labor for God as long as He chooses to have them. If they were sent to hell and permitted to labor there for souls, they would be happy. Others talk as if people weren't meant to enjoy life; but when they get to heaven, they expect to be happy. They have no enjoyment except in hope. The other already has the reality, the very substance of heaven begun in the soul.

What kind of Christianity do you have? True Christianity is always the same and consists in disinterested love to God and man. Does this describe you? Does your faith consist of the pursuit of happiness as the great end? There is no condemnation in true Christianity. But if any man doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.

Please don't make a mistake and 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. How many are deceived, acting under legal considerations, while they know nothing of true Christianity?

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