

Selfishness

by Charles Finney

Selfishness is a state of the Will that prefers self-gratification over the law of reason, leading to a lack of zeal for God's interests and a reversal of moral priorities.

Scripture: Hosea 10:1, Matthew 6:24, Philippians 2:3

Topics: "Holiness", "Selfishness"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the issue of selfishness in his sermon, emphasizing that true holiness cannot coexist with selfishness. He defines selfishness as the willful pursuit of self-gratification over the higher moral law of benevolence, and he outlines various forms and evidences of selfishness, including a lack of zeal for God's interests and prioritizing personal gain over the well-being of others. Finney warns that all forms of selfishness are equally inconsistent with salvation, urging listeners to examine their lives for signs of selfishness and to strive for a life of benevolence and selflessness.

Transcript

'Israel is an empty vine; he bringeth forth fruit unto himself.'--Hos. 10:1.

In this passage the Lord complains of the selfishness of Israel; and it is my present design to show,

I. WHAT SELFISHNESS IS NOT.

II. WHAT IT IS.

III. THAT IT CANNOT CO-EXIST WITH HOLINESS IN THE SAME MIND.

IV. MENTION SOME EVIDENCES OF SELFISHNESS.

V. THAT ONE FORM OF IT IS AS INCONSISTENT WITH SALVATION AS ANOTHER.

I. What selfishness is not.

1. It is not a desire of happiness, and dread of misery. This is perfectly constitutional in all moral beings. It is involuntary as we know by consciousness, and is, therefore, destitute of all moral character.

2. It is not the desire of approbation. This desire, to whatever degree it may exist, so far forth as it is mere desire, is constitutional, involuntary, and without moral character.

3. It does not consist in the desire of any personal good, nor in the dread of any personal evil. These are perfectly natural, and have no character.

4. Nor does it consist in any constitutional appetite, passion, or impulse, or in what are generally called propensities. Some persons speak of selfish propensities, as though our propensities had moral character, and we were blamable for them. But this is absurd. There is no such thing as a selfish propensity. All the appetites, passions, and impulses are natural, and are naturally excited whenever we come into correlation with the objects adapted to excite them. They are wholly the products of the Sensibility, and have neither voluntariness, nor moral character about them so far as they themselves are concerned.

5. Nor does selfishness consist in any kind, or degree of mere desire as distinguished from choice or willing. As I have often said, every one knows the difference between desire and willing, by his own consciousness. For example; I may desire to go to Europe, and strongly desire it, and yet on the whole, never will to go, for desire does not, but will does govern the conduct.

II. What selfishness is.

1. Man, as I have before said, possesses three cardinal faculties, called Intelligence, Sensibility, and Will. This we know by consciousness.

2. The Will is influenced by motives addressed to it, either through the Sensibility, that is, by constitutional desires and impulses, or through the Intelligence, that is, by truth, and obligation to comply with it, as perceived by the Intellect. There is no other way in which will can be influenced, and it must of necessity choose between the gratification of the impulses of the Sensibility, and the dictates of the Intelligence.

3. The law of God is revealed and imposed by the Reason. Man is, in a certain sense, his own law-giver; or, as Paul expressed it, he "is a law to himself." If the grand principle of the law of God did not lie revealed in our reason, we could never be influenced by any outward precepts, and could never perceive obligation, simply because we should have no standard of either truth or morality. We could not know whether the Bible is the word of God or a lying fable, because we should have no possible way of testing it--In short, if our reason did not reveal and impose the great principle of the law of God, all religion and morality would be to us naturally impossible. All precept and instruction therefore are valid to moral beings, only because, when addressed to them, their reason recognizes their truth, and imposes obligation to conform to them; and whatever the Reason will not thus recognize as true, cannot be obligatory. All the commands, and truth of God are addressed to moral beings through their reason. I should perhaps say here, that by reason, I mean that power of the mind which affirms all necessary and absolute truth: or, in other words, the intuitive faculty. All moral influences then come to the will through the Reason, and all virtue consists in the conformity of the Will to its requirements.

4. The Sensibility always invites the Will to seek gratification from the objects which awaken its susceptibilities. For example; The appetite for food is awakened by the perception of its appropriate object; and whenever awakened, and to whatever degree, is impulsive to the will. The impulse will be strong or weak in proportion to the degree in which the susceptibility is excited, and in proportion to its strength, will impel the will to consent to the gratification. So it is with all the appetites, desires, and passions. That this is true we know by our own consciousness.

5. There are then two, and only two directions and occasions of human action, between which the will must make its election.

(1.) The law of the reason requires the exercise of benevolence, that is, of supreme love to God, and equal love to our neighbor. It requires that this should be the ultimate intention, or supreme choice of the Will.

(2.) The Sensibility invites to gratification irrespective of the law of the reason. The Sensibility is naturally blind. It impels towards every object, which awakens its susceptibilities, for its own sake, that is because it will afford gratification, and for no other reason. Now every man knows by his own consciousness that such are the relations of his reason, and his sensibility to his will and that he is under the necessity of choosing between them.

The way is now prepared to state directly what selfishness is.

6. It consists in willing the gratification of the Sensibility--in the mind[']s consecrating itself to its demands in opposition to the law of the reason. It is a disposition to gratify self instead of seeking a higher and holier end. It is a state of the Will, as distinguished from the Sensibility.

7. It must then always consist in what I called in the last lecture, an ultimate intention. The ultimate end chosen by the mind is self-gratification. This, in some form or other, is preferred to every thing else. It is not selfishness to have a capacity of gratification, nor is the gratification itself selfishness. Brutes have a sensibility like men, and when the demands of their awakened susceptibilities are met they are gratified, but there is no selfishness in them, nor are they capable of selfishness, because they have no reason to impose on them a higher law than the mere impulses of their sensibility. These impulses, are, however, regulated in them by instinct. But moral beings have a higher faculty which reveals to them a higher end of life, and imposes on them obligation to choose it. It requires them to regard all personal gratification as a means, and not an end, and therefore to be held in perfect subordination to the law imposed by the reason. The Bible only repeats the demands of every man's own reason, when it says-- 'Whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.' That is, hold all your appetites, desires, and passions, with a steady rein, and under perfect control. Now selfishness, consists in preferring self-gratification to the demands of this higher faculty, that is, making personal gratification an end--the ultimate end of life.

8. This is just what the Bible calls the 'carnal mind,' 'walking after the flesh.' That is, the carnal mind consists in the mind's choosing the gratification of the Sensibility as the end of pursuit. I have said already, that every object of desire, is desired for its own sake, that is, because it is capable of affording gratification. Selfishness therefore consists in choosing desired objects because they are desired; or to gratify self, and not as a means to the glory of God.

III. Selfishness and holiness cannot co-exist in the same mind.

1. In the preceding lecture, I showed that holiness, or true virtue consists wholly in disinterested benevolence, that is, in willing every interest according to its perceived relative value. Benevolence must be a supreme choice, or ultimate intention; for if it wills every interest according to its perceived value, there is nothing else in the universe which it can will. If every good is willed for its own sake according to its perceived value, it is naturally impossible to will any thing beyond that, or aside from it. To say that you can is a contradiction. It is the same as to say that you can will every interest according to its perceived value, and not will it at the same time.

2. Now what is selfishness? As we have already seen, under the previous head, it is also an ultimate intention. In other words it is the preference of self-gratification to the law of the reason, that is, to benevolence. Instead of willing every good according to its perceived value, it is willing one good more than all other goods. Whenever an individual prefers his own gratification to the demands of his own reason, he does it in the face of the law of God, and in defiance of his authority.

3. But these are, self-evidently, opposite choices and therefore cannot co-exist in the same mind. Is it possible that there can be two supreme, ultimate conflicting choices in exercise by the same mind, at the same time? This cannot be.

I may add that benevolence and selfishness regard and treat every perceived interest in the universe, in an order exactly the opposite of each other. Benevolence regards God's interests first, and aims at his glory as the supreme good; next the well being of the universe; then of this world; afterwards of its own nation; then of its own community; next of its own family; and lastly of itself. Now selfishness exactly reverses all this. The selfish man places self first, and regards his own interest as supreme; then he regards the interest of his family and special friends, but only so far as supreme devotion to himself on the whole prompts; next he regards his own community or city in opposition to all other communities and cities, whenever their interests clash; then he regards his own nation, and is what men call very patriotic, and would sacrifice the interests of all other nations, just as far as they interfere with his own; and so he progresses till finally, God and his interests find the last place in his regards. That this is so, is a simple matter of fact as every body knows, and how then is it possible that these two opposite choices should co-exist in the same mind? Believe it, who can.

IV. Several evidences of selfishness.

1. A want of zeal for God's interests. Men are always zealous for that which they supremely choose, and if they are not zealous for God's honor, it proves that it is not the object of their supreme regard. To deny this is absurd.

2. The absence of pain and indignation when his interests are disregarded. If they were willed as the supreme good, it would be impossible to witness his commands and authority set at naught without the keenest sense of pain and indignation.

3. More zeal and labor in promoting self interest, than the interest of God, is an evidence of selfishness. It proves to a demonstration that your own interests are preferred to his. Men universally manifest the most zeal in behalf of that in which they are most interested.

4. If, therefore, persons think they have piety, while they are more zealous in promoting self interest than the interest of God, they are deceived, and are probably mistaking mere desire for religion. Let me here remind you that the will necessarily governs the conduct, while desire does not. I may strongly desire to go to Ohio, and never go, but if I really will to go there, I go of necessity unless my volition is overcome by superior force. So if a man is really benevolent, he prefers the interest of God and his universe to his own, and manifests a zeal accordingly.

5.* Where persons pay more attention to their own personal interests than to the eternal interests of others, it is evidence that they are selfish. They certainly are not regarding things according to their relative value.

6. The absence of a spirit of prayer is an evidence of selfishness. In a world like this prayer is the very breath of benevolence. How can a benevolent man walk through the streets, and mingle in society, without his spirit being stirred within him, and venting itself in earnest prayer? It cannot be.--What! thousands around us, jostling us at every step, in all their sins, already suffering many evils the consequences of transgression, exposed to eternal death! Who that believes there is any help in God for them, can avoid prayer? Certainly none but those who are supremely selfish.

7. Another evidence of selfishness is spiritual epicureanism. There is a certain class of persons who are always wanting something to make them happy, and whatever measures or preaching will not secure this result, they of course reject. Now what state of will does this indicate? Why, a selfish state to be sure. They do not want to have their minds enlightened, and their duty pointed out because this renders them unhappy; but they delight to sit and have their emotions fanned till their sensibility is all in a glow, and the preaching which does that, is to them the only gospel. Now this is nothing but a refined selfishness.

8. Where persons are more zealous to defend their own reputation and character than the cause and honor of God, it is an evidence of selfishness. There are multitudes even of professors of religion, who, if men should say anything against their character, or if in any way, their reputation was about to suffer, would be thrown into an agony, lie awake all night, and wet their pillow with tears; but if they should hear a ribald infidel rail against God, and cover his character all over with foul reproaches, it would scarcely catch a passing notice. Now why is this? Plainly because they prize their own character more than the honor of God, and are supremely selfish.

9. Unwillingness to make personal sacrifices to promote a higher good is another evidence of selfishness. This needs no illustration.

10. Another evidence of selfishness is the dominion of any appetite or passion over the will. There are some who pretend to be religious, who habitually gratify certain appetites and passions which they admit to be wrong. Ask them if they do not believe it to be wrong; they say, yes, but they cannot overcome it. And mark me, that is a selfish man; that is the very definition of selfishness. It is preferring self gratification to the known will of God. It is what the Apostle means by "minding the flesh."

11. A want of interest in the prosperity of others, is another evidence. Selfish men do not know what they lose, by neglecting to interest themselves in the good of others. The benevolent man enjoys the happiness of others, and thus all the well-being of the universe, of which he is the spectator, contributes to his own enjoyment. Myriads of rills of happiness pour into his own bosom. Why? Because the prosperity of others is the very thing on which his heart is set, and it is a contradiction to say that he will not be gratified in witnessing the realization of that which he supremely chooses.-- Whenever, therefore, an individual manifests a want of interest in the happiness of others, it proves that he does not really will it, and is therefore supremely selfish.

12. Another evidence is a disposition to envy and murmur, if others possess what you do not.-- What state of mind is that? It cannot bear to see anybody live in a better house, have better accommodations, superior endowments, or richer equipage. Instead of rejoicing in their good, it repines that they are not on a level with itself. It says, let no one have more than I. Now this must be supreme selfishness. How would benevolence feel and talk? Plainly it would rejoice in their good, and its language would be, "I thank God that others possess these good things if I do not."

13. A spirit of speculation is another evidence of selfishness. By this, I mean a disposition to make bargains out of others. Now would benevolence represent the article above its real value--would it attempt to get rich by taking the advantage of others? I have been amazed whenever I have tho't of the perfect mania, which swept like an epidemic over all the length and breadth of the land some years since. It was the great object to make money by speculation. Christians, and even ministers rushed headlong into the general scramble after money. When asked why they did so, they replied, they wished to make money for God, that is, in plain English, they wished to promote the glory of God, by trampling upon his law. Why, the principle is as absurd as to become a pirate to get money to give to the Bible Society. Suppose a man should turn pirate, and go out upon the high seas to run down, and destroy every vessel that came in his way under pretense of getting money to give to the Bible Society! And when remonstrated with, suppose he should urge the importance of sending abroad the Bible, and that he could make more money by piracy in order to accomplish this object, than in any other way! Who would give him credit for any benevolence in this? So to attempt to justify speculation on the ground of acquiring means by it, to spread the Gospel, is to put on an impudent face and baptize rebellion against God, with the name of holiness. Rob your neighbor to give to God!!

14. Squandering time and money to gratify artificial appetites is another evidence of selfishness.-- There are certain appetites which must be gratified that is, the things desired are necessary to our existence and usefulness, and where gratification under appropriate circumstances is proper. To expend money for the gratification of these, is to make a proper use of it, so long as it is done in accordance with the dictates of reason. Such are all the constitutional appetites which are really such.-- But when they are not natural, but artificial, their gratification can be nothing else but selfishness.-- To illustrate, take the appetite for ardent spirits, tobacco, or any other unnatural stimulant.

15. An unwillingness to bear your part in making public improvements, is another evidence of selfishness. Suppose roads are to be made, or churches to be built, or anything else to be done which is essential to the public good, what else can it be but selfishness to stand back from bearing your part in the labor and expense necessary to accomplish it? I have sometimes seen cases of this kind: A church has become deeply involved in debt, and certain individuals seem to want to leave it. They manifest peculiar anxiety to change their relations, when it is as manifest as can be, that their only reason is they wish to avoid doing their part towards paying the debt.

16. When self interest must be appealed to in order to excite to action, it is evidence of selfishness. When a man is benevolent, all that is necessary to move the deep foundations of his moral being, is to lay before him some real good to be achieved. It is enough for him to have his intelligence enlightened. But in vain do you attempt to move the selfish man by appeals to his benevolence. If you wish to move him, you must exhibit an entirely different class of motives, such as take deep hold on his sensibility. If he be a professor of religion, perhaps it will be impossible to move him until you can shake his hope. Duty must be brought, with such persons, into such relation as to appear the least of two evils, one or the other of which they must endure, and then their very selfishness leads them to perform it. Or it must be so placed before them as that its performance will advance their own special interests. For example: Suppose a church is to be built. Now if you are obliged to go to a man and tell him how it will increase the value of his own property, or in some other way promote his own peculiar interests, you may depend upon it, that man is supremely selfish. It is the same with this class of persons as it respects their eternal interests. Nothing will move them so effectually to any kind of religious effort, as a representation of the personal good which will accrue to them in the future world. In short, the only way in which you can influence such men, is by

appealing either to their hopes or fears.

17. Increasing expenditures as your income increases, instead of doing more good. During the great speculation, it was my lot to talk with men very frequently upon the principles by which they were actuated in driving after wealth. They all said, they were seeking to do good with it. But I observed that with scarcely an exception, they increased their expenditures, and equipage, their coaches, and fine horses, and rich furniture, just in proportion as their means increased, so that they were no more able to do good than before. It would be the same if their wealth were increased by thousands, and this uniform result proves that the principle which they adopted was radically wrong. The truth is, you may as well talk of stealing for God as of speculating for Him. The one is just as consistent as the other.

18. A disposition to suspect others of selfishness. This is an almost universal characteristic of selfish minds, and never of a benevolent one. It is for this reason that selfish men so generally, deny that there is any such thing as disinterested benevolence. Mankind are disposed to regard others in the light of their own character. This might be illustrated by the case of Satan and Job. Job was an upright man and served God disinterestedly.-- But Satan, being supremely selfish, did not believe it. Said he, "Doth Job serve God for naught?" intimating that the only reason for Job's apparent obedience, was the personal advantages which would accrue to him from it, and even when he had stripped him, by the permission of God, of almost all that he held dear, and Job remained unmoved, he still intimates that his only reason for doing so was a selfish one. "Skin for skin, yea all that a man hath, will he give for his life. But put forth thy hand now and touch his bone and his flesh and he will curse thee to thy face." The truth is, a benevolent man is naturally unsuspicious-- 'thinketh no evil.' But show me a suspicious man, one who is always attributing the worst motives to others, and I will show you a man who is himself supremely selfish.

19. An indisposition to do as you would be done unto, is another evidence of selfishness. I gave very high offense to certain persons in one of our cities, not long since, by pressing this thought. Suppose yourself and family to be enjoying all the blessings of liberty, suppose you have a wife whom you dearly love, and children, upon whom have centered the affections of your heart, but in a woful day, they are wrested away from your embrace, and plunged into slavery. How would you feel? How would you talk? Would you say we have nothing to do with slavery? Nothing to do with it! Would you say it is nothing to me? Nothing to me! You may depend on it, in that case you would bring up no plea of the delicacy of the subject, as an excuse for refusing to interest yourself in their behalf and to condemn the outrageous system by which they were oppressed. In this way every one may learn his duty towards those who are enslaved in this nation. Put yourself and your family in their place and inquire how you would wish others to regard your condition and to act in reference to it. Now mark, the very thing which you would judge to be their duty in the circumstances supposed, is your own in your present circumstances. Suppose it were now, as it was some years ago, that the Algerines were enslaving our fellow citizens--how would it be regarded by this nation? It would be the signal for instant war. Thousands would press forward to enlist in the work of vengeance upon the oppressors, and if they could not otherwise accomplish the rescue of those in bondage, they would wade through an ocean of blood, and desolate with fire and slaughter their whole territory. But alas! the winds of heaven may come over from the south, laden with the groans of thousands of our fellow men, daily suffering the wrongs of slavery, in its worst forms, and with thousands scarcely a feeling is enlisted in their favor. Is that loving their neighbor as they love themselves? Is this the religion of Jesus Christ? My soul come not thou into the secret of such religion as that! And stranger still, multitudes even attempt to make the Bible sanction and authorize this accursed system. They say the Bible has really authorized it as an institution. But who can believe it? What! the same God who uttered the fiery law,

requiring man to love his neighbor as himself, and denouncing death on all who will not comply with the requisition, authorize and sanction a system, which tramples on this law at every step, by which, one man seizes his brother,

"Chains him and tasks him,

And exacts his sweat with stripes, that mercy,

With a bleeding heart, weeps when she sees inflicted

on a beast."

Who does not regard such a supposition, when fairly stated, as downright blasphemy, and who would not reject the Bible as a gross imposition, if it really did thus contradict itself and belie its pretended author.

20. Another proof of selfishness, is covetousness. Some cannot bear to see others have what they have not without coveting it, and often to such a degree, that they can scarcely keep their hands from it.--Now wherever this spirit exists it is supreme selfishness.

21. A disposition to get the best seat in church or the prominent place in assemblies. For example, in churches where they sell their seats, you will see them striving to get the best seat and the best cushion, and the most convenient location, and if they fail of this they are more distressed than if a soul were lost. So, often, when churches are formed instead of trying to secure a house best adapted to the service of God, and instead of trying to promote the conversion of sinners, they lay themselves out to get the best house, and the best organ and the best choir, and the best minister, and then sit down to be preached to heaven. But how shall a minister preach to them? He will utterly fail to do them any good, and to save them from death, if he does not put his finger into their very eyes, and rebuke their horrible selfishness.

V. One form of selfishness is as inconsistent with salvation as another.

Remember that selfishness consists in obeying the propensities, appetites, passions, and desires.--This devotion to self gratification develops itself in a great variety of ways without changing its character. With one, one propensity predominates, with another, another. One for example is an epicure. His desire for pleasant dishes predominates over everything else, and he does not value money only as it contributes to his gratification. Another is a miser, and is entirely too much devoted to the desire of wealth to be an epicure. Indeed, he thinks his ruling passion contemptible. One is fond of dress, and values money only as it contributes to the gratification of this desire. This is his form of selfishness. He thinks of it all the year round, and labors with his eye on self gratification in this form. Right over against this, another is fond of power or influence to such an extent as to wonder that any can be fond of such a trifling gratification as dress affords. But he is as much enslaved by his desire of power as the other by his devotion to dress, and is equally selfish. Again, some are so fond of reputation, as to do anything that public sentiment requires, rather than to fail of popularity. This is their form of selfishness.--Their reputation is preferred to the well-being of the universe. But others have such a large development of some appetite or passion as to sacrifice reputation for it. For example: the drunkard.--He regards his appetite for intoxicating drinks above everything else, and his character weighs not a straw when brought into competition with this. Now each of these different forms of selfishness is a violation of the law of God. One just as much so as the other. They all lord it over the will.--And yet those devoted to one form take great credit to themselves because they are not devoted to all the others. The truth is in all cases the sin lies in the indulgence of any appetite,

desire or propensity whatever, in opposition to the law of love.

REMARKS.

1. It matters not which of the propensities prevail over the will in order to constitute selfishness. None of them has moral character in itself. To prefer the indulgence of anyone of them to higher interests is what constitutes sin. It is minding the flesh. It is enmity against God.

2. If we are asked why we have these propensities if they are not to be gratified? I answer, (1.) Those which are natural are given to serve and not to rule us. For example, the appetite for food. Without an appetite for food we should never take it, but it is essential to our existence, and therefore the appetite serves to secure life. So the desire for knowledge. Were there not a constitutional desire for knowledge, who would ever seek it. But knowledge is essential to our highest good. The desire for it therefore, serves to secure this essential to our well being. (2.) Farther, these propensities are not only given to serve us, but to afford us gratification. The benevolence of God gave us these constitutional propensities, so that we might find pleasure in that which is for our well being. Were we destitute of appetites, desires, passions, and susceptibilities we should be as incapable of pleasure or pain, gratification or happiness as a marble statue. Had the human race remained innocent the gratification of these susceptibilities would doubtless have afforded them exquisite pleasure. That we possess them, therefore, must be regarded as a proof of the divine benevolence towards us, notwithstanding the fact that they render us liable to various and strong temptations. (3.) Many of the propensities that are most despotic, God never gave. They are wholly artificial, and are produced by a voluntary perversion of those which are natural.--For example, the use of intoxicating drinks, or tobacco, and various narcotics.

3. Indulgence in any form of selfishness is utterly inconsistent with salvation. It is sin, and the Bible declares that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord."

4. A man who is selfish in his business can no more go to heaven than a pirate can. How should he? They are both living for the same end, self-gratification, under different forms, and are both therefore directly opposed to the will of God.

5. A vain man or a vain woman, can no more be saved, than a licentious man or a licentious woman. They prefer the gratification of their vanity, to the end of life which the law of God requires, while a licentious man or woman prefers the self gratification afforded them, in this grosser form, to the same end.

6. There is so little discrimination, as to the nature of sin, that endless delusions prevail. For example: while it is known that drunkenness, licentiousness, theft, robbery, murder &c. are utterly inconsistent with salvation, various other forms of sin are regarded as consistent with a profession of religion. But the truth is, as I have said before, a man who is selfish in his business, or who practices selfishness in any other form, however slight it may seem, can no more be saved than a drunkard can. Why cannot a drunkard be saved? or the licentious man, or the thief? Because he is selfish. So it must be with any other man who is selfish, whatever may be the type which his selfishness has put on. If a man were drunk but once a week he would be excommunicated as hopelessly lost, but he may be habitually avaricious, vain, or an epicure, and yet be regarded as a good christian in the estimation of the church. If any church should continue the drunkard in its communion, it would bring upon itself the frown of Christians universally, and yet persons indulging various forms of selfishness are to be found in almost every church, and regarded as true Christians. Scarcely any one suspects that they will not be saved. Now this must be delusion. But why is this mistake? It is because there is so little discrimination respecting the nature of sin. The truth is, if any

appetite, desire, or propensity whatever, rules over the will, it matters not what it is, the man is in the way to death.

7. To suppose religion to consist in obeying any feeling whatever, merely as feeling, is a most ruinous error. And yet multitudes know no other religion than this. They suppose happy feelings to be religion, and generally do just as they feel, irrespective of the demands of their reason. Now these persons have never yet apprehended the true idea of religion, namely that it consists in the entire consecration of the will to the law of God, as it is regarded and imposed by their reason. Feeling is not that to which the will should bow, for it is blind; but reason, as it perceives the law of God with its intuitive eye, should be heeded in its faintest whisper respecting the application of that law.

8. Selfishness was the first sin of man; that is, his first sin consisted in preferring his own gratification to the will of God. Now see whether I have given the right definition of sin. The first pair were placed in the garden in which were many trees bearing an abundance to supply their wants, but in the midst was one upon which God laid a prohibition. It is an important question why God laid this restraint[.]? It is a question which is often asked, and it is important that it should receive a right answer. The design undoubtedly was to teach them that they must control their sensibility--that they must keep their appetites, desires, and passions in subjection to the law of reason. This lesson it was of vast importance they should learn, and learn too as soon as possible, before their sensibility had such a development, that is, before their appetites, desires, and passions, should acquire such strength, during their ignorance of the tendency of gratifying them, as to render it certain that they never would deny themselves of their gratification when they came to see its tendency. For this reason God prohibits their eating the fruit of one particular tree. Now here Satan steps in, and being well aware of the relation of the Sensibility to the Will, and of both to the Reason, he suggested to our mother Eve, that God was selfish in laying restraint upon the constitutional propensities, and then presents such considerations before her mind as awakens two of the strongest of them, the appetite for food, and the desire of knowledge. This placed the demands of her reason which echoed the prohibition of God, and the demand of her constitutional desires in opposition. Between these her will was compelled to choose. And in that evil hour she preferred the gratification of these appetites to the will of God, and thus

"Brought death into the world, and all our woe."

This was the first sin. Observe now, these constitutional appetites were perfectly innocent in themselves, but the sin consisted in her consenting to their gratification in opposition to the requirement of God.

9. Selfishness is the first sin of every human being. Children come into the world in perfect ignorance both of the law of God and of the tendency of their sensibility. Now what is the process by which they sin. See the little child. At first it can scarcely turn its head or open its eyes. It is hardly conscious of any thing. Soon its sensibility begins to be developed, and foremost its appetite for food. As soon as you give it any thing, no matter what, it puts it right into the mouth. Gradually other appetites are awakened, equally constitutional, and therefore without moral character. At what age their reason begins to be developed we cannot know. But it is doubtless very early. But as soon as it is developed and affirms obligation then its very next is a moral act. Hence the appetites, desires, and propensities of its sensibility which have previously been developed, and its perception of obligation are both placed before its will, and it prefers the former to the latter. This is its first sin, and this is the first sin of every human being. But why does it always choose wrong? Because previously to the development of its reason, its will has constantly been under the control of its appetites, and it has acquired a habit of consenting to them. On the contrary the

first affirmations of its reason are necessarily feeble. He therefore chooses self-gratification in opposition to it.

10. Selfishness constitutes sin in every instance. It is easy to show that this must be so.

11. We can see what regeneration is. It is turning from selfishness to benevolence. It is the act of the will preferring the well being of the universe to self-gratification to which it has always previously consented.

12. It is easy to see the necessity of regeneration. Who does not know that unregenerate men are universally selfish? And who does not know that selfish men thrown together could never be happy? I have often wondered what those persons mean who deny the necessity of regeneration. The truth is it is self-evident.

13. We can see why men are commanded to regenerate themselves. If regeneration is an act of the will, nothing can be more rational than this requirement. It is of necessity their own act.

14. See why the Spirit of God is needed in regeneration. Men have been so habituated to gratify themselves, and their attention is so absorbed with this that the Spirit of God is needed to develop their reason, and to throw the light of heaven upon its eye, that it may see at once the nature and beauty of religion in contrast with the nature and deformity of sin. This is conviction. Then the sinner needs to be charmed away from his selfishness by correct apprehensions of the character of God, and the love of Christ. This it is the Spirit's office to effect.

15. Finally we can see what is meant by the Apostle, when he speaks so often of being led by the flesh and by the Spirit. An individual is led by the flesh when his will is in subjection to the Sensibility. This is the carnal mind. On the contrary, an individual is led by the Spirit, when his will is in subjection to the law of his reason, which is developed and applied by the Spirit of God.

And now, beloved, where are you? Are you led by the flesh, or by the Spirit? Are you selfish, or are you benevolent? What would you say if you were called to appear before God to-night? Could you say, I know that I am led by the Spirit of God and therefore am a child of God? O! beloved, search yourselves, lest you be deceived!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/selfishness/>

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