

The Affections and Emotions of God

by Charles Finney

God is a moral agent who exercises all the affections and emotions ascribed to him, including love, anger, and grief, and sinners compel him to give them up to death.

Scripture: Psalm 103:13, Isaiah 30:18, Ezekiel 18:32, Hosea 11:8, Matthew 23:37, Luke 15:20, John 3:16, Romans 5:8, 2 Peter 3:9, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "God's Emotions", "The Grief of God"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that God is a moral agent who experiences genuine emotions such as love, grief, and compassion towards humanity. He illustrates that it grieves God to abandon sinners to death, as He desires their salvation and has made great sacrifices for it. Finney argues that sinners compel God to give them up due to their choices, which places God in a position where He must prioritize the greater good of the universe. The sermon calls for a deeper understanding of God's affections, urging sinners to return to Him, as He yearns for their repentance and restoration.

Transcript

Text. Hosea, 11:8.--"How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? my heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together."

In discoursing upon this text I design to show,

I. THAT GOD IS A MORAL AGENT.

II. THAT HE REALLY EXERCISES ALL THE AFFECTIONS AND EMOTIONS ASCRIBED TO HIM IN THE BIBLE.

III. THAT IT IS A REAL AND GREAT GRIEF TO HIM TO ABANDON SINNERS TO DEATH.

IV. THAT THEY REALLY COMPEL HIM TO DO SO.

I. I am to show, that God is a moral agent, i.e. that he possesses and exercises the powers of moral agency, intelligence, will, conscience and all those susceptibilities that lays mind open to the full force of motives. That he is such an agent, I infer,

1. From the fact that man was created in his image; and we know from consciousness that we possess and exercise the powers of moral agency. The image of God in which man was created, could not possibly have related to his moral character, for moral character is not a subject of creation. If by moral character is intended any thing that is praise or blame-worthy, it is absurd nonsense to say that it can be the subject of creation. It may be induced by moral means or moral considerations, as I suppose moral character always is produced in man whenever there is any holiness in him, and in this sense man's character may be the subject of creation. But, that it should be the subject of creation in the same sense in which the nature of man is created is certainly impossible.

2. If God be not a moral agent, he can have no moral character. In other words, he could be neither praise nor blame-worthy. For certainly none but a moral agent can have moral character--can deserve praise or blame.

3. If God be not a moral agent he cannot possess a rational happiness, i.e. he could possess none of that happiness which arises out of a virtuous character.

4. If not, he is not a proper object of love, or worship, or obedience. And certainly a moral agent like man has no right to obey or worship any but a moral being.

5. If not, it is impossible that moral agents like men, should love, or worship, or obey him, when they come to know him.

6. The works of creation afford incontestible evidence that God possesses and exercises, not only the attributes of a moral agent, but that these attributes are absolutely infinite in extent.

7. Both the moral and providential governments of God prove unanswerably the same truth.

8. The Scriptures every where, in every variety of form, represent God as a moral agent. And scarcely a single thing asserted of him, in the scriptures, could be true, unless he is a moral agent.

II. God really exercises all the affections ascribed to him in the Bible.

1. This must be so from the very laws of his being.

2. The Bible ascribes love, hatred, anger, repentance, grief, compassion, indignation, abhorrence, patience, long-suffering, joy and every other affection and emotion of a moral being, to God. Upon these scriptures, I remark,

(1.) He must feel, or he is not virtuous. Virtue cannot consist in the mere abstractions of the intellect, but belongs to the heart. And an intellect without moral feeling cannot be virtuous.

(2.) He must feel towards every thing according to its nature or character or he is not virtuous.

(3.) He is able to consider, at one and the same time, the nature and character of all events, and being infinite, is able to feel towards every thing in existence, precisely according to its nature, character, and relations.

(4.) It is his duty to exercise these feelings in kind and degree just suited to every thing that exists.

(5.) His holiness consists in this and in nothing else--in regarding every thing according to its real nature and character. Were it otherwise, instead of being holy, and an object of praise and love, he would be wicked and not worthy of our praise or love.

(6.) All these states ascribed to him in the Bible must be the real exercises of his mind, as they are only the natural and necessary modifications of love that must certainly exist under the circumstances in which he is placed. There really are in the universe, objects that ought to excite his mind, and if he is love, must excite all the affections and emotions ascribed to him.

III. It is a real and great grief to God to abandon sinners to death.

1. This is evident from the fact that it really ought to be a great grief to God to give the wicked up to eternal death. It is really a great evil. And it is impossible that benevolence should not regard it as such. And if there really exist a necessity for it, it must notwithstanding be regarded as a great evil.

2. It really must be a great grief to God if he is love. It is impossible that it should not be.--And it is a contradiction to affirm that God is love, and yet that he is not grieved with the necessity of taking such a course with sinners.

3. The Bible declares it in many ways. See the text. "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? my heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together." Here the language is plainly that of a father who finds himself under the necessity of giving up and expelling from his family a froward son as less evil than to suffer him, by his example, to ruin all the rest. In this text God expresses himself as not only exercising the feelings of a father, but as exercising the feelings of intense grief, as if he had said, "I have done all that in me lies to reclaim and save you, and oh, how shall I give you up? "My heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together!" As if God were standing before the sinner in the attitude of a father and really overcome with excessive grief. There are many other passages of scripture that plainly declare the same truth.

4. All his works imply it. Every thing that God has made in the universe demonstrates his intense desire to promote the happiness of his creatures. And so much pains certainly could not be taken by any mind to promote the happiness of others without being grieved with the necessity of giving them up to ruin.

5. His grace manifested in the Atonement, is the highest possible demonstration that he has all the feelings ascribed to him in the Bible, and in an infinite degree. Did he not really love sinners, could he make so great a sacrifice to save them? Were he not angry at sin--were he not infinitely just and inflexible in maintaining the principles of his government, could he have given his Son to die as their substitute, rather than pardon them without an Atonement? We certainly should consider it the highest possible evidence of love in a human being to give himself or his son to die for us.

IV. Sinners really compel God to give them up.

I know that this statement is very diverse from the common opinions of men, for they argue merely from the omnipotence of God that he can save them if he will. And they never ask the question whether under all the circumstances of the case, he can wisely will to save them. Under this head, I remark,

1. That since God has created you moral agents, and placed you under a moral government, making you responsible for the right exercise of your powers of moral agency, he has no right to set aside your liberty and treat you inconsistently with the nature he has given you.

2. If he had a right and should actually set aside your liberty, in doing this he would render your salvation naturally impossible; for salvation without virtue is absurd, and virtue without free-agency is a contradiction. So that you cannot possibly be saved unless you can be induced by the considerations of the gospel to love and serve God.

Here it may be objected, that in the parable of the marriage the king is represented as ordering his servants to go out and compel people to come in.--But this is only a moral compulsion--such a degree of argument and persuasion, that, as it were, constrains the sinner to come without at all interfering with his freedom.

3. There certainly is a point beyond which forbearance in God would be no virtue, and where further arguments and persuasions and efforts to save them would be entirely inconsistent with the honor, and dignity, and glory of God, and consequently with the rights and well-being of the universe.--Beyond this point then, God cannot and ought not to go. If he sacrifices his own character, he sacrifices with it the holiness and happiness of all other beings, as their holiness and happiness must depend upon their confidence in him. It is easy to see therefore, that the conduct of sinners imposes the necessity upon God of giving them up to damnation as the least of two evils. If they take such an attitude, as they often do, as to render it unwise in him to pursue them any further with offers of grace, he must either give them up and save the universe of holy beings, or he must give up his character and thereby abandon the entire universe to ruin.

REMARKS.

1. It is a great and ruinous error to suppose that the declarations of scripture, with regard to the moral feelings of God are mere accommodations to human weakness.

(1.) Because it is denying the nature of God.

(2.) It is denying his whole moral character.

(3.) It is representing him as a hypocrite. He professes such feelings, and what shall we say if he does not possess them? When he professes to love his creatures, are we to understand that he does not really love them, but that he merely acts as we do when we love? But why does he act so? How are we to understand him as feeling? If this language does not mean what it says, what does it mean? He really ought to exercise benevolence, and he professes to exercise it. And are we to be told that his professions are a mere empty boast--an accommodation to human weakness? But it probably will not be denied that he really loves.--If this be admitted, then all the other affections and emotions ascribed to him, must necessarily be exercised by him. They are the very modifications that ought and must exist in view of the objects presented to the mind of God. So that if God does not really exercise these affections and emotions, he is not only a hypocrite, but is in all other respects infinitely far from his duty. If therefore it be maintained, that the moral feelings ascribed to God, are mere accommodations to human weakness, it must also be denied that God is love or benevolence. And that to deny this is a ruinous and damning error needs no proof.

2. To maintain that the representations of the moral feelings of God in the Bible are only accommodations to human weakness, is to represent him as a mere intellect or abstraction, and consequently destitute of every thing that ought to or can engage our love.

3. It is cutting off all possible sympathy between us as moral beings and God. If God be not a moral being with moral attributes and feelings, we can have no sympathy with him--can neither know, nor love, nor worship him any more than we could Juggernaut.

4. It is to render all true religion impossible.--The man that has an idea that these declarations are mere accommodations to human weakness, can certainly have no true knowledge of God, and consequently no true religion. If God be not what the Bible represents him to be, then what is he, and who knows him? If these are not his real feelings then we are infinitely mistaken about his character. If these are not his feelings and this his character, then we know not what they are.

5. If these are not the real feelings of God, then we have no true revelation of God. If these passages of scripture do not mean what they say, it is impossible for us to tell what they do mean. And if God has not, in these passages, discovered to us the real state of his heart, we know nothing of his heart. But the truth is, that these passages speak the same language with all his works. It is plain that his works and word are one continuous and complete system of revelation. And the same great gushing heart of love is everywhere manifest.--And to maintain that the Bible declarations instead of meaning what they say, are mere accommodations to human weakness, amounts to the affirmation that all God's ways, and works, and word are a stupendous system of hypocrisy and deception.--

6. The representing of the scriptures as an accommodation to human weakness, is an over-looking and denying a principal design of the incarnation of Christ. One of the grand objects Christ had in view was to reveal to us the heart of God. Now that which we see in Christ, are the very feelings of the mind of God. Did Christ exercise these feelings in reality, then God exercises them, and so does every other holy mind, that has a knowledge of the same facts.

7. But it may be objected that we ought not to ascribe human feelings to God. I answer, we ought to ascribe feelings the same in kind to God, that holy men have. Wicked human feelings are by no means to be ascribed to God. But holiness in men is just what it is in God.

8. But again it is objected that God is not man that he should repent. I reply, that repentance may mean emotions of sorrow, or it may mean a change of mind. God never changes his mind, but often, nay always, exercises emotions of sorrow; for objects that ought and must excite these emotions, in a holy mind, are always present before him.

9. Again it is objected, that if these things are so, God cannot be happy. I answer that all these feelings ascribed to God, when combined are perfect happiness. I don't know how to make this plainer than by borrowing an illustration from the prismatic colors produced by the sun's rays. Let a pencil of the sun's rays be thrown upon a prism, and, as you doubtless know, the rays will be so refracted as to exhibit all the colors that exist in nature. Now when these rays are separated, it is found that none of them are white, yet when combined their brightness is ineffable. Just so with the feelings of God. Separate his moral feelings, and no class of them would be unmingled happiness, yet when combined they are infinite happiness.

10. Again it is objected that this view of the subject really implies change in God. I answer, No. For God has always known and felt what he now knows and feels. He has no new knowledge.--All events have been eternally present to him.--He has always known, and felt, and enjoyed just what he now knows, and feels and enjoys.

11. God enters fully into all the relations between himself and his creatures. I mean that he enters into these relations with all his heart and all his soul. He is feelingly alive to them all. It should ever be remembered that he is not a mere abstraction, an intellect without volition, emotion or sympathy. But his feelings are infinitely intense. So that every object in the universe, every creature, every want, every woe, every sorrow, and every joy, enkindle in his mind just that feeling in kind and degree, which the nature of the thing is calculated to excite.

12. In Christ he has the most perfect sympathy with us. From many parts of scripture, it is manifest that one great design of the incarnation was to create a sympathy between God and men. Having been in the flesh, Christ has been "tempted in all points like as we are." He was made perfect by suffering and temptation, so as to be able to succor all those that suffer and are tempted.

13. It is objected that if God really exercises anger he is wicked. I answer, No. His anger is a benevolent anger. It is not selfish or malicious or a disposition unjustly to inflict pain. But it is the holy indignation of a good and gracious sovereign against those who would injure the interests, disturb the tranquility, and mar the happiness of his obedient subjects.

14. This view of God's character is that which renders God acceptable to creatures like us. We have the advantage of approaching him knowing that he has the feelings and heart of a father. A guilty son knows that a father's heart can be reached, when the bosom of a stranger could not be approached or moved by his tale of woe. And however guilty this son may be, if he knows that his father is good, he is assured that in his heart, he shall find a powerful advocate to plead his cause. So a wandering rebellious sinner, may, like a returning prodigal, approach God with the certainty that a father's heart, and a father's love will yearn over him, and if it be within the reach of possibilities, will save him from deserved destruction.

15. They don't know God who don't conceive of him as a moral being, exercising in reality those feelings ascribed to him in the Bible. Indeed if they conceive any thing else of God, they are as far as possible from knowing the true God, and might as well worship Juggernaut as the being whom they call God. He is a moral agent to all intents and purposes, exercising perfectly in kind, and infinitely in degree, all the affections and emotions of a moral being. As such we can form rational, though inadequate conceptions of him--can approach him with confidence--can sympathize with him in his efforts of benevolence. Our minds can commune with his mind--and our hearts beat in unison with his heart. We can enter into his desires and purposes, and efforts, and in short, we can be assimilated to him. But make any thing else of God, and we do not, cannot, ought not to love or worship or obey him.

16. How aggravated in God's sight must sin appear, to induce him with such feelings as he has to give his own offspring up to eternal death. We can conceive of a father banishing forever a beloved son, because his depravity has become so great, that his banishment from the family becomes indispensable. Yet the conduct of that son must be very aggravated to induce a father to do this, and to justify in the estimation of the other members of the family such a course. So sin, in its tendency and in its contagious nature, must be an abominable thing to induce a God who could give his own son to die for sinners, after all to give them up to go to hell.

17. The depravity that can wear out such love as this, and actually carry matters so far as to compel God to send the very sinners for whom Christ died to hell, in order to preserve the universe of moral beings from destruction, must be horribly great. Sinners, think what you do. God has made you voluntary agents, and made it an unalterable law of your being, that you shall be free, and responsible for the use of your

freedom. And now, in the exercise of this liberty, you place God under circumstances where with all his love, he is obliged to send you to hell as a less evil than to let you go unpunished.

18. How strongly will the universe approve of the dealings of God in destroying sinners forever. When all that he has done and suffered for them shall pass in full review in the solemn judgment before the assembled universe--his providential kindness--the giving of his Son--the influences of his Spirit--all his long suffering shall be subjects of distinct consideration. What a spirit of most deep and perfect acquiescence will be felt by all the holy, when the Judge pronounces the sentence: "Depart ye cursed into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

19. It will be a delightful consideration to God and all the saints, that God has done all the nature of the case admitted, to save sinners and they would not be saved.

20. From this and many other texts, it appears that God feels compelled, and actually does give sinners up. And now remember that when he feels constrained to do this by you, your case is as hopeless as if you were already in hell. And remember that you are in danger of it every moment that you persist in impenitence. Nay, perhaps some of you are already given up. If so I have no expectation that either this or any other sermon that I could preach to you would do you any good.

Finally. Let all who have sinned, and who are sensible of their guilt, return immediately to God. Take the parable of the prodigal son, and consider well the thrilling truths there communicated.

And now I conjure you, to conceive of God as he really is, a being who not only knows but pities, and deeply yearns over you with all the feelings of a heart of infinite sensibility. Go pour out your tears, your prayers, your confessions, your souls before him; and his heart shall rejoice over you, and his soul be moved for you to do you infinite good.

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