

The Gospel the Savor of Life or of Death

by Charles Finney

The Atonement of Christ is a demonstration of God's great love and desire for the salvation of men, and ministers glorify God by preaching or exhibiting the whole gospel.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 2:14

Topics: "The Nature of the Gospel", "The Atonement of Christ"

Description

Charles Finney delivers a powerful sermon on the dual nature of the Gospel as both a savor of life and death, emphasizing that God's delight in Christ's atonement is profound and that the full exhibition of Christ's love serves to reveal God's character and desire for humanity's salvation. He argues that the Gospel's impact is inevitable, producing either transformation in those who accept it or hardening in those who reject it, ultimately glorifying God in both outcomes. Finney asserts that God's justice and holiness are honored even in the damnation of the unrepentant, as it demonstrates His unwavering commitment to righteousness and the seriousness of sin. The sermon calls for a deep reflection on the responsibility of individuals in response to the Gospel and the eternal implications of their choices.

Transcript

TEXT.--2 Cor. 2:14-17: "Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savor of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ in them that are saved, and in them that perish. To the one we are the savor of death unto death; and to the other the savor of life unto life: and who is sufficient for these things: for we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ."

In remarking upon this text, I will endeavor to show:

I. THAT GOD HAS GREAT DELIGHT IN THE ATONEMENT OF CHRIST.

II. THAT A FULL EXHIBITION OF CHRIST MUST DO GREAT GOOD, WHETHER MEN ARE SAVED OR LOST.

III. THAT SUCH AN EXHIBITION OF CHRIST WILL PRODUCE GREAT AND MANIFEST CHANGES IN THE CHARACTER OF THOSE WHO HEAR.

IV. THAT GOD WILL BE AS TRULY HONORED IN THE DAMNATION OF THOSE WHO REJECT, AS IN THE SALVATION OF THOSE WHO RECEIVE CHRIST.

I. God has great delight in the Atonement of Christ.

This is evident,

1. From scripture testimony, Phil. 2:5-11:--"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He H[h]umbled [H]himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

From this passage, it appears that God was highly pleased with the Atonement of Christ Jesus, on account of which "He highly exalted Him, or gave him a name above every name."

Isaiah, 53:10-12:--"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him: He H[h]ath put Him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, He shall see his seed, He shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong; because He hath poured out his soul unto death; and He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

Here also God is represented as being so pleased with the Atonement of Christ as to give Him a great reward for his labor of love.

The text also contains the same doctrine, and multitudes of other passages that might be noticed.

2. God has great delight in the Atonement of Christ, because he sincerely desires the salvation of men. He knew it was impossible to save them upon the principles of his government, without an Atonement. And his delight in the Atonement of Christ, as the means of their salvation, is equal to his desire for their salvation.

3. The self-denial of Christ must have been greatly pleasing to his Father. What virtuous father would not consider himself as greatly honored by the exhibition of such a spirit as Christ manifested in dying for his enemies? When God saw his Son willing to leave the realms of glory, to take upon Him the form of a servant, to deny Himself even unto death, for the sake of making the salvation of his enemies possible, this must have been infinitely pleasing to a God of love.

4. His whole life and death under the circumstances in which He lived and died, must have been infinitely pleasing to God--his life, under circumstances of such trial, so spotless, so meek, so just like God, such an exhibition and illustration of what God is, his death, so submissive, so Godlike, it must have come up before his Father "as an odor of a sweet smell."

5. The bearing of the Atonement upon the universe, must have given it great value in the sight of God. But I shall enlarge upon this thought under the next head, viz.:

II. A full exhibition of Christ must do great good, whether men are saved or lost.

1. Because it fully reveals and demonstrates the infinitely great love of God to the universe. Should the province of an earthly monarch be betrayed into rebellion by slander, and the insinuation of selfishness in the government, would it not be highly honorable to the sovereign, instead of sending forth his armies, to crush and slay them, to send forth his son to expostulate, instruct, and insure them of the disinterested love and good will of the government toward them. Now suppose that this son, associated with the father in the government, should go forth, not at the head of an army, but alone, unarmed, unattended, unprotected, should go from town to town, on foot, taking unwearied pains to instruct them, healing their diseases, spending whole nights in prayer for them, and when persecuted in one town should go to another--suppose that he should continue this course of teaching, of expostulation, and of prayer, and when at last they rose to murder him, should meekly suffer himself to be crucified, rather than injure a hair of any man's head, would not such a demonstration as this, of the love and disinterestedness of the government, greatly confound its enemies, and greatly honor the sovereign? Who cannot see that it certainly would?

2. A full exhibition of the Atonement, must do great good whether sinners are saved or lost, because it fully contradicts the slander by which our race were drawn off from their allegiance to God. The serpent instigated our first parents to rebellion by insinuating that God was selfish, in prohibiting their eating of a certain tree. It was necessary therefore, that this slander should be thoroughly repelled and refuted. The infinitely great and disinterested love of God exhibited in the Atonement is the most impressive refutation of it.

3. The full exhibition of the Atonement of Christ must do great good because it fully justifies God as having acted all along, under the influence of the most perfect love, and condemns sin as infinitely unreasonable, inexcusable, and abominable.

4. Such an exhibition of the Atonement must do great good because it demonstrates God's great willingness and desire to save his enemies, whether they will be saved or not. It rolls the responsibility of their salvation or damnation upon themselves. It proves that while they have forfeited their lives, God has no desire to take this forfeiture at their hands. It proves that while they deserve to die, He has no pleasure in their death.

[5.] 4. The full exhibition of the Atonement manifests the great value of their happiness in his estimation, and his great reluctance to punish them--that his love for them was so great as to give his only begotten Son to die for them--that He accounted the death, even of his own Son, as a less evil than their destruction, notwithstanding they so infinitely deserved to be destroyed.

[6.] 5. A full exhibition of the Atonement of Christ must do great good, whether sinners are saved or lost, because it must establish forever the confidence of all holy beings in God. But for the Atonement, the universe might have been open to the surmise at least, that there was possibly something not exactly right in the dealings of God with the inhabitants of this world. But the disinterested love of God, manifested in the Atonement, must forever put his character entirely and infinitely beyond all suspicion.

[7.] 6. A full exhibition of the Atonement of Christ must do great good to the universe, whether sinners are saved or lost, because it reveals to sinners, to the whole world, and to the universe, the sincerity of God, by exhibiting the fulness of the provisions of grace. It demonstrates that the provisions are ample, that there is love and grace enough in God's heart, and ample fulness in the provisions of the gospel for the salvation of every sinner, and this stops every mouth, and leaves the damnation of every sinner, to be

wholly chargeable upon himself.

III. Such an exhibition of Christ must produce great and manifest changes in the character of those who hear.

1. Because they cannot but receive or reject it. If they receive it, it will of course make them holy, fill them with love to God and men, and mold their whole character into the image of Christ. If they reject it, it must greatly confirm their selfishness and depravity[,] greatly harden their hearts, and place them in an attitude of greater, and more daring, and odious, and shameless rebellion than before.

2. Such an exhibition of God as is made in the Atonement, must of necessity either subdue or greatly aggravate the spirit of rebellion and hostility of his government. It is impossible that it should not be so. If this exhibition of love does not subdue a sinner, it is because of his unbelief. And he cannot disbelieve the infinite and disinterested love of God, in view of the Atonement, without virtually charging God with the most abominable hypocrisy, and with every thing that is hateful. His soul must take this attitude, or it must consent to the truth as it is revealed in the Atonement. Now the consent of the heart to this truth must fill the soul with love, and the life with holy conformity to his law. But the rebellion of the heart against this truth, must greatly deepen and strengthen, and forever confirm the reign of sin in the heart and life.

3. Such a great change of feeling as must necessarily result from an understanding of the Atonement of Christ, must be manifest in the temper and life. With but little knowledge of God, sinners may proceed in the indulgence of their lusts, without being sensible of any direct hostility to God. But when He reveals his love to them in the Atonement, they must necessarily either take strong ground against Him, or repent, abandon their sin, and give up their whole being to his influence. This knowledge must necessarily produce an immense change in the temper of their mind toward God. Before, they knew and perhaps thought but little of Him. But after understanding the Atonement, they cannot but know and think much of Him. And the attitude of their minds must be that of ferocious resistance and rebellion, or of gentle and Christ-like obedience. Such a change of the temper as this, must and will manifest itself in some way in the life.

4. When Christ is fully preached, persons must be fully subdued, or confirmed in sin. I say FULLY preached. It is amazing to see how many sinners have sat under what is supposed to be the gospel, and yet have little more knowledge of Christ than a heathen. They have never as yet conceived the idea of the love of God, as exhibited in the Atonement, and remain as quiet, and as self-complacent as a Pharisee, without ever being stirred up on the one hand, to opposition, or on the other, to submission. But when Christ is so exhibited as to force home light upon the sinner's conscience, and compel him fully to understand the doctrine of Atonement, the offices, relations, and love of Christ, as a sin pardoning, and sin subduing Savior, the soul must be soon subdued, or confirmed in sin.

IV. God will be as truly honored in the damnation of those who reject, as in the salvation of those who receive Christ.

1. Because it will be known He did all the nature of the case admitted, to save those who are lost--that when they had forfeited their lives, He took not the forfeiture at their hands. But when they infinitely deserved damnation, He pitied and spared, and sent his Son to die for them--that they refused salvation either by the law or gospel--that they would neither obey the law, nor repent and be forgiven--that nothing that infinite love could do for them, could persuade them to accept salvation.

2. His sending them to hell after manifesting so great a desire to save them, will most impressively demonstrate and illustrate his holiness and justice. So great was his pity and love for them, that He would sooner die Himself, in their behalf, than send them to hell, and yet so great is his holiness and justice, that when they refuse salvation upon the only principles that can reconcile justice and mercy, he does not hesitate to send them to the depths of hell. If an earthly sovereign should order his own children to execution, for rebellion against the laws, would not this be an impressive exhibition of his regard to public order, and of attachment to the principles of his government? What an amazing reluctance did God manifest in the Atonement, to sending sinners to hell. And after such an exhibition of bleeding mercy, if He is obliged to send them to hell, how infinitely honorable to Him, will be such an exhibition of his Holiness and Justice.

3. The damnation of the finally impenitent, will greatly increase public confidence in God. What a glorious magistrate is this, how infinitely desirous to avoid public execution, and yet so attached to the principles of his government, so in love with order, so high and holy in his regard to the public interests as to sentence his own children to an eternal hell, if they persist in rebellion, and those very children for whom his love is so great as to have laid down his own life for them! What must the universe think of a sovereign that could do this! What an infinitely holy and glorious king is this! And how must such an exhibition as this establish forever the confidence of all holy beings in Him and his government.

4. The damnation of the wicked, as rejecters of the gospel, will give to the law of God great power. The death of Christ has magnified the law, and made it honorable, has manifested God's great regard for it, and demonstrated that, sooner than repeal it, or suffer it to be trampled under foot, he would have his own Son to die, that a way might be opened for setting aside its penalty in consistency with the honor of its precept. The damnation of the wicked, will greatly strengthen the power of his law, by showing that so high is God's regard for it, that when so costly an expedient for setting aside its penalty had failed to subdue the sinner, he would execute his penalty upon him notwithstanding his love and compassion for him, were infinitely great.

REMARKS.

1. This subject sets in a strong light, the error of those who represent God the Father as being angry with Christ, and as seeking his vengeance upon Him, and all such like representations. On the other hand God says, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Instead of God's being angry with Christ, He was infinitely pleased with Him for undertaking the work of redemption.

2. From this subject, we see that sinners cannot rob God of his glory. Sinner, you need not suppose that the Atonement will be lost to the universe, although you reject it. It may be worse than lost to you. But to God and to the universe, it will not be lost. Not one drop of the blood of Christ was shed in vain. And whether you accept the Atonement or not, God's government shall receive the full benefit of Christ's Atonement.

3. We see the mistake of those who hold to a limited Atonement, and alledge as a main argument in its support, that if Christ died for all men, He died in vain for those who are finally lost, and that such a provision were vain and useless. Now this goes upon the supposition that the exhibition of God in the Atonement, is to have no bearing upon his character and government in any other world than this. Nay, it is founded in such a contracted view of the moral bearings of the Atonement, as even not to see that in the estimation of those who are saved, a real provision for those who reject, would be infinitely honorable to

God.

4. From this subject we see that the value of the Atonement, is not at all to be estimated by the number saved. If not one sinner was saved--if all mankind persisted in rejecting it, the exhibition of that love which is made in the Atonement, would be infinitely important to the universe, in confirming holy beings, and strengthening the power of his government.

5. We see that the usefulness of ministers to the government of God, is not at all to be estimated by the number of persons saved under their ministry. Look at the text, "for" says the Apostle, "we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ in them that are saved, and in them that perish. To the one we are the savor of life unto life, and to the other the savor of death unto death.["]

If then ministers fully exhibit Christ, God is as truly honored when men reject, and are damned, as when they believe, and are saved. They cannot but be useful to the universe in proportion to their faithfulness. Their usefulness respects God and his government. To the sinner they may be "a savor of death unto death." But unto God they are "a sweet savor of Christ not only in them that are saved, but in them that perish." They hold forth the love of God in Christ. In this God is glorified, and Christ is preached, in which they "do rejoice and will rejoice," and in which all holy beings will rejoice; sinner, whether you are saved or lost.

6. The opposition excited by preaching Christ, will as really glorify God, as the holiness produced by it. I say nothing of the degree in which the one or the other will glorify God. But that in both God will be really glorified. If the preaching of Christ produces holiness, God will be glorified by it. If sinners rise up and oppose, it will only further illustrate the nature of sin, and the character of sinners, and more impressively illustrate his justice in their damnation.

7. Neither God nor ministers aim at the damnation of sinners, nor rejoice in their destruction, when they are sent to hell. But they do rejoice in the triumph of justice, in that infinitely glorious exhibition of God's character, which is made in their destruction.

8. The more singly and earnestly God and ministers desire and labor for the salvation of sinners, the more their final damnation, if they are lost, will glorify God. If God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost--if ministers and christians all labor earnestly and honestly, and with all long suffering for the salvation of sinners, and they will not be saved, then sinner, remember when you go weeping and wailing along down the sides of the pit, God's justice will be the more glorious, by how much the greater pains have been taken to save you.

9. To promote the salvation of men and to honor God in their damnation, ministers must have strong and manifest sympathy with God. The more strongly they sympathize with God the more fully will they exhibit his great desire to save men. And the more fully they exhibit God the more thoroughly do they strip the sinner of all excuse and show that his damnation is imperiously demanded by the principles of eternal righteousness.

10. Ministers glorify God in proportion as they preach or exhibit the whole gospel. If they pour out before the sinner the whole heart of Christ, if they exhibit Him in all his love, relations and offices, if they unveil the fulness of his compassion and grace, they are removing the sinner infinitely far from all excuse, and rendering his damnation at every step, a more illustrious and impressive exhibition of the holiness of God.

11. Opposition to the preaching of Christ is to be expected though not desired. Though the damnation of the sinner will glorify God, yet his salvation is to be preferred, as his salvation would glorify God, to say the least, as much as his damnation. In addition to which his salvation is a real good in itself, and a good which God and all holy beings greatly desire.

12. But if sinners will oppose, ministers should not be discouraged by it and feel as if they were doing no good. My brother, if you are really preaching Christ, exhibiting Him in your pulpit, in your life, and in all your ways, you are certainly doing good and great good, to the universe, and greatly glorifying God. If every sinner in your congregation goes down to hell, be not discouraged, my brother. "Hold up the hands that hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees." But do you say my compassions are moved for them, I cannot bear to be to them a savor of death unto death. How shall I meet them in the Judgment and see them sent to hell--my neighbors, the people of my prayers and my tears, the souls for whom my heart has groaned, and agonized, and bled. My brother, God pities them more than you do. Christ's heart has bled for them more than yours. They are the people for whom He has not only prayed and wept, but for whom He has actually died. How shall He meet them in the Judgment, and weep over them as He did over Jerusalem, and say, "O sinners, sinners, how often would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her brood under her wings, and ye would not. O that thou hadst known the things that belong to thy peace. But now are they hidden from thine eyes." [""]How shall I give thee up? How shall I deliver thee? 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." O my brother lift up your thoughts to the compassionate but infinite holiness and firmness of Christ. He knew how these sinner would treat his Atonement. Notwithstanding He would die for them. He knew that He should be to them a savor of death unto death; yet He knew that He should greatly glorify God by dying for them and offering them mercy.

And now my brother, be willing to exhibit in your body the dying of the Lord Jesus. Be willing to make up in your self-denying labors and sufferings, for their salvation, the sufferings of Christ that remain, that through you, God may be glorified, that you may be "unto God a sweet savor of Christ both in them that are saved and in them that perish."

13. Here we have the true ground of consolation, when we see men hardening under our ministry. If in revivals of religion, we estimate the good that is really done, by the number of conversions only, we overlook one important item, in the amount of glory that shall redound to God. The truth is, that in revivals of religion, ministers are not only a sweet savor of Christ in them that are converted, but also in them that are hardened. To the one class they are "a savor of life unto life, and to the other of death unto death." In both these classes God is greatly glorified.

14. Every one may know, and is bound to know what effect the gospel is producing on himself, and whether it is to him the "savor of life unto life or of death unto death."

15. We should observe what its effect is upon our families, and narrowly watch its influence upon the minds of all around us, and lay ourselves out with all our might, to make it the savor of life unto life. But if through the perverseness of the sinner's heart, he will make it the savor of death unto death, let us rejoice not in his hardness nor in his destruction, but in the fact that the holiness and justice of God will be the more gloriously illustrated in his damnation.

16. And now sinner where are you? Did you ever realize the circumstances of awful solemnity and responsibility in which God has placed you? Do you know what you are doing? Do you understand the

relation which the gospel ministry sustains to you? Do you not tremble when you see your minister, and know that God has unalterably ordained that he shall be unto you the "savor of life unto life, or of death unto death"? Do you know that he is the messenger of God to your poor soul?--and that you can no more prevent his being to you a savor of life or death, than you can prevent your own existence. Sinner, Christ has not died in vain. Ministers do not preach in vain. Christians do not pray in vain. The Holy Spirit does not strive in vain. Heaven from above does not call in vain. Hell from beneath does not warn in vain. God's mercies are not in vain. The gifts of his providence are not in vain. His judgments and rebukes are not in vain. All these influences are acting upon you. They will act, they must act. They must be to you the "savor of life unto life or of death unto death." How infinitely solemn and awful are your circumstances. How dreadful your responsibility! How short your life! How near your death! Are you prepared for solemn judgment? Sinner will you go down instantly on your knees, and offer up your whole being to God, "before wrath comes upon you to the uttermost"?

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