

The True Service of God

by Charles Finney

The true service of God consists in a heart of supreme benevolence, or supreme devotedness to the glory of God and the interests of the universe.

Scripture: Joshua 24:19, Matthew 22:37

Topics: "Holiness", "True Service to God"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the distinction between legal and gospel service to God, arguing that true service arises from a heart transformed by holiness and benevolence. He explains that legal service is motivated by fear or obligation, while gospel service is a joyful expression of love for God and others. Finney asserts that acceptable service to God requires a radical change of heart, aligning one's motives with God's desire for universal good. He warns that without this transformation, individuals cannot truly serve the Lord, as He is a holy God. Ultimately, Finney calls for a deep, heartfelt commitment to the service of God that brings joy and satisfaction.

Transcript

TEXT--Josh 24:19: "Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the Lord: for He is a holy God."

In this discussion I will show:

I. IN WHAT THE HOLINESS OF GOD CONSISTS.

II. THAT THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF SERVICE, BOTH OF WHICH CLAIM TO BE RENDERED TO GOD.

III. WHICH CONSTITUTES THE ACCEPTABLE SERVICE OF GOD.

IV. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN IT.

V. HOW THESE TWO KINDS OF SERVICE CANNOT, AND HOW THEY CAN BE DISTINGUISHED FROM EACH OTHER.

VI. IF ANY MAN WOULD SERVE THE LORD, HE MUST BEGIN BY MAKING HIS HEART HOLY.

I. In what the holiness of God consists.

1. It consists in benevolence, love, or good-willing; willing the universal good of being.
2. All his moral attributes are modifications of benevolence, and his holiness consists in a disposition, under all circumstances, to do just that which is upon the whole best to be done, and most promotive of the general good, to whatever self-denial and exertion it may call Him.

II. Two kinds of service, both claiming to be rendered to God.

Legal and gospel services. Legal service is a course of life pursued, not from supreme love for and delight in it for its own sake, but from other considerations, sometimes originating merely in constraints or restraints of conscience, hope, fear, regard to reputation, personal safety, and multitudes of such like considerations.

Gospel service is not a constrained, but a joyful compliance with convictions of duty, from supreme love to the path of duty, and delight in it for its own sake. The first is regarded by the mind, as, after all, only a choice between two evils, neither of which is supremely lovely and desirable to the mind for its own sake. This is slavery, and this kind of service turns upon the very same principle upon which the service of slaves is rendered. They prefer laboring for their masters, to the evils which would result from their refusal. They therefore, upon the whole, choose to labor as they do; but it is only a choice between two evils. As liberty is out of the question, they must labor, or suffer the consequences. They therefore prefer to labor. But this, after all, is slavery. This kind of service rendered to God, is bondage and slavery.

The last, or gospel service, is regarded by the mind as supremely good or lovely, and desirable for its own sake. This is true liberty. It is the very course of life which the mind would prefer, if left free to choose between all possible courses of life; and that solely on its own account, or for the sake of its intrinsic value. I know not how to illustrate the difference between these two kinds of service, more naturally and familiarly, than by adverting to the conduct of children. They will labor, rather than be frowned upon by their parents. But labor is not regarded by them as desirable for its own sake; but is only chosen as the less of two evils. They would prefer play to labor, if left wholly to themselves. They love their amusements for their own sake. Now such is the true service of God. It is not submitted to as the less of two evils. It is not regarded merely as something that must be done, however irksome the task. It is not an up-hill business, a grievous labor, in which there is no satisfaction. But, like the plays of children, it is delighted in and loved for its own sake.

III. Which constitutes the acceptable service of God.

1. Supreme devotedness of heart to the same end to which God is devoted. God is love, or benevolence, and is supremely devoted to the good of universal being. His heart is full of zeal, and his mind is wholly bent in promoting universal good, as far as it can possibly be done. Now the true service of God consists primarily in a heart of supreme benevolence, or of supreme devotedness to the glory of God and the interests of the universe.
2. It consists in the supreme devotion of the whole being to the same end to which God devotes all his attributes--to promote his own happiness and glory, not because it is his own, but because it is infinitely the greatest good in the universe--to promote the holiness and happiness of moral beings, and the universal good of sentient existence, is that to which God has devoted his entire being.

3. It consists in devoting the whole being to this end, for the same reasons for which God devotes Himself to the promotion of this end. Suppose you employ a servant who labors only for his wages, and feels no interest in the end which you are aiming to promote. He takes no interest in your business, for its own sake--has no disinterested desire to promote the end at which you aim; but simply labors for his wages. He begins as late in the morning, rests as long at noon, labors as sparingly, and breaks off as early at night as will possibly do, without being curtailed in his wages. Now you rightly say this man is serving himself and not you. He is a mere eye-servant. He is entirely selfish, and has an entirely different end in view, from what you have. And now suppose the end you have in view is not selfish, is not your own aggrandizement, the promotion of your own interests of happiness, but the promotion of the general good--would you not blame such a servant for not taking an interest in the end itself? Would you not regard his selfishness with abhorrence? Would you not regard him as engaged in self-service, and as deserving the severest reprobation? Suppose a king to be entirely disinterested, and engaging all his attributes, and all his wealth, and all his time, in the disinterested promotion of the public interests--suppose him to say to his subjects, "Here, lay hold and help me to forward this great work, and as your individual interests are parts of the public interest, I will see that you have your reward. But the thing I require of you is, that you take an interest in the end for its own sake. If you do not take an interest in the end for its own sake, your labor will all be selfishness and slavery. If you do not love the work on its own account, it will of course make you miserable. It will hang heavily on your hands, and you will long for the going down of the sun. But let your heart be deeply imbued with the spirit of doing good; let this be the grand object of your life--love it for its own sake, and your labor will be to you a continual feast." Now suppose that the subjects should take hold of the work as mere mercenaries, caring for nothing but their wages, taking no interest in the public happiness and well-being; but simply serving for reward. This would be a selfish, eye-service, and not heart-service. This would be serving self, and not the king.

Now the true service of God consists, not only in devoting the whole being to the promotion of the same end, but also with the same motives, or for the same reasons; that is, from supreme benevolence, or an absorbing disposition to do good for its own sake, and because it is good.

4. It consists in doing all this with the same feelings with which God engages in this work. If the heart is fully devoted to this work--if the whole being is given up to it, as God's being is given up to it--and if this is done for the same reasons, and from disinterested love to the work itself, the feelings with which we engage in it will naturally and necessarily be the same in kind as those in which God engages in it. The feelings with which we engage in it and pursue it, must depend upon our motives for engaging in it. If our motives are the same with God's, our feelings will be the same in kind with his.

IV. What is implied in acceptable service to God.

1. This kind of service in sinners, implies a radical change of heart, from selfishness to disinterested benevolence. Here let me be understood. By disinterested benevolence I do not mean, that the mind feels no interest in it; but I mean the direct opposite of this--that the mind does take the deepest, nay, a supreme interest, in promoting the good of being, for its own sake and on its own account.

2. It implies a deep and efficient sympathy with God, in regard to the great end of life. By deep, I mean, not a mere superficial sympathy, consisting in the emotions, but a sympathy of heart, a sympathy lying in the deep foundations of moral action. Persons may have emotions and desires, that consist merely in the effervescence of an excited mind, while the heart, or the deep fountain of moral action, is after all supreme selfishness. By a deep sympathy, then, I mean a sympathy of heart, of will, of preference, and purpose. By

an efficient sympathy, I mean an energetic, active sympathy; one that produces active and energetic effort, to glorify God, save the souls of men, and promote universal good.

3. This kind of service implies a continual manifestation of this state of mind, by most strenuous and self-denying efforts to promote the universal good of being.

4. It implies the same feelings in kind, towards whatever hinders or promotes the work. For example--It implies supreme complacency in God. God, knowing Himself to be infinitely benevolent, has a supreme complacency in Himself. Therefore every benevolent mind in the universe will feel a supreme complacency in God, because He is benevolent. We naturally and necessarily feel complacency in a being whose character is in all respects just as we would wish it to be.

5. It implies complacency in the character of Christians, so far as benevolence is discernible in them.

6. It implies grief and indignation at sin and sinners, and whatever is inconsistent with the highest good of the universe.

V. How these two kinds of service cannot, and how they can be distinguished from each other.

1. They are not always distinguishable from each other in their outward manifestations, or in the visible conduct of men. The servant who labors merely for his wages, may to most human eyes appear just as well as one who is truly disinterested in his labors. A mere legal religion may be strictly punctilious in all the outward duties of life. Such to a great extent were the Pharisees. And such have been great multitudes in every age of the Church.

2. They cannot always be distinguished by the amount of zeal upon religious subjects. The Pharisees were very zealous. They would compass sea and land to make one proselyte. Paul testifies, that Jews had a "zeal of God, but not according to knowledge." Paul seems to have been as zealous before his conversion as afterwards. His legal and his gospel religion could not then be distinguished from each other, in the amount of zeal which he manifested while under the dominion of each.

3. Not always in their visible results and effects. A legal zeal may be very punctilious in the discharge of outward duty, may make many proselytes, may bring multitudes under conviction, and to embrace a legal religion. It may bring multitudes under the dominion of a religion of resolutions, and self-dependent efforts to serve the Lord. The law has its converts as well as the gospel. Persons may be baptized unto Moses as well as unto Christ. And thorough legal laborers may promote extensive apparent revivals. And indeed, they may be real revivals, so far as they go; a revival of conviction in the Church; a revival of confession; a revival of zeal; a revival of resolutions; a revival of conviction among sinners; a general awakening to religious subjects, and a revival of obtaining hopes, and engaging in the legal service of God. But all this, without a solitary conversion to Christ and his gospel; and perhaps, with scarce an instance of bringing an individual from a state of legal slavery into the liberty of the blessed gospel. Now so far as the number of converts is concerned, so far as the number of revivals is concerned, and so far as most visible appearances go, these two kinds of service may so far resemble each other as not to be distinguished the one from the other. But--

4. They may be distinguished by the kind of zeal. It was the kind, and not degree of Paul's zeal, that distinguished his Christian from his legal character. His Christian zeal was benevolent, mellow, kind, compassionate, heavenly. His legal zeal was boisterous, denunciatory, censorious, hardhearted, fiery,

earthly, sensual, devilish. Thus a truly Christian zeal may always be distinguished from a legal zeal, in the manifestation of deep benevolence and compassion, a mellow, chastened, heavenly sensibility to the wants and woes of men.

5. Gospel service may be distinguished from legal service, by the fact, that it affords to the mind the fulness of a present satisfaction and happiness. It is the mind's present solace and joy. It is its own present reward and happiness. In proof of this I observe--

(1.) That from the very nature of the case it must be so. The acceptable service of God is doing just that which the mind views in its own nature, as supremely desirable and agreeable. It is that which the mind loves for its own sake, and therefore naturally and necessarily makes the mind happy. The more intently the mind is engaged in this employment, the more full and perfect is its joy, from the laws of its own being. And here I must remark, that a very singular objection has been stated to this view of the subject; which is, if the mind loves the service of God for its own sake, there is no more virtue in that state, than there is in eating our food, because we love it. To this I answer--our appetite for food is constitutional, and not something in which we are voluntary; and therefore, partaking of our food because we love it is not virtuous. If our love of the service of God were involuntary and constitutional, as our appetite for food is, the service of God would not be virtuous. But it should be ever remembered, that the appetite, or disposition to serve God, consists in benevolence, or good-willing; and is therefore entirely voluntary. Indeed the very appetite is itself a choice. It is therefore in the highest degree virtuous. If our appetite for food were voluntary, and depended upon our own voluntary choice, both the exercise and the gratification of our appetite, from correct motives, would be virtuous. The virtue of serving God, then, lies in the exercise of benevolence, or in choosing to do good for its own sake. The very exercising and carrying out of this benevolence in the active service of God, necessarily brings with it a present and essential happiness. God's happiness consists in his benevolence. God has always found his happiness in the exercise of benevolence. He does not need to wait till he has done his work, before he enjoys it. He is not waiting to complete his toils, and expecting happiness only when He can sit down in supineness and inaction. The more glowing and deep his benevolence, the greater is his happiness. Just so it is with a gospel service. The mind engaged in this service feels that "an excellent oil is distilled" upon it, in the very exercise itself. It feels itself fanned by the breezes and moistened by the dews of heaven. It feels itself to be in an atmosphere of love. Its very labors are essential sweetness, and it drinks from the river of life, while it pushes its efforts to promote universal happiness.

(2.) It is a course of life in which all the powers of the mind harmonize; which harmony of soul is necessary and essential happiness. Why, it is love. It is the love of God. It is the temper and spirit of God. It necessarily produces the very happiness of God in kind; and but for outward trying circumstances, would be as perfect as that which God experiences, amid his own labors of love.

(3.) In proof of this position, I quote from the Bible. Job 27:10: "Will he delight himself in the Almighty? will he always call upon God?" Here it is mentioned, as one of the marks of the hypocrite, that he does not delight himself in the Almighty. It is truly wonderful to what an extent the Bible exhibits true religion as affording present joy and delight. I will only quote a few, out of the great multitude of passages upon this subject, that may serve as specimens of the light in which the Holy Scriptures present this subject: Isa. 32:17: "The work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever."

Isa. 54:13: "All thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children." Isa. 66:12: "Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream." Isa. 26:3: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee; because he trusteth in thee." Ps. 37:4: "Delight thyself in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thy heart." 40:8: "I delight to do thy will, O my God; yea, thy law is within my heart."

Heb. 10:5: "When He cometh into the world, He saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me." Ps. 119:14, 16, 35, 47, 70, 92, 97, 111, 127: "I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies as much as in all riches. I will delight myself in thy statutes; I will not forget thy word. Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight. I will delight myself in thy commandments, which I have loved. Their heart is as fat as grease; but I delight in thy law."

Unless thy law had been my delights, I should then have perished in mine affliction. O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day. Thy testimonies have I taken as a heritage for ever; for they are the rejoicing of my heart. I love thy commandments above gold, yea, above fine gold." Ps. 112:1: "Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord, that delighteth greatly in his commandments." Job 15:11: "Are the consolations of God small with thee? Is there any secret thing with thee?"

Ps. 19:8-11: "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honey-comb. Moreover, by them is thy servant warned; and in keeping of them there is great reward." Acts 13:52: "The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Ghost."

Rom. 14:17: "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." Rom. 15: 13, 29: "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost." 2 Cor. 1:24: "Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand." 2 Cor. 2:3: "I wrote this same unto you, lest when I came, I should have sorrow from them of whom I ought to rejoice; having confidence in you all, that my joy is the joy of you all." 2 Cor. 8:2: "In a great trial of affliction, the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality."

Gal. 5:22: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." Phil. 1:3, 4: "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making request with joy." Heb. 12:2: "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." 1 Pet. 1:8: "Whom having not seen ye love; in whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." 1 John 1:4: "These things write we unto you, that our joy may be full." 2 Cor. 7:4: "I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation."

Heb. 10:34: "Ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance." Deut. 28:45-47: "All these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which he commanded thee; and they shall be upon thee for a sign and for a wonder, and upon thy seed for ever."

Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things," &c. In this last passage the terrible curses of the law are represented as coming upon the children of Israel, because they had not rendered that service to God which made them happy. They had not joyed and delighted in the service of God. Phil 3:1: "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord." Phil 4:4, 10: "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice."

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again: wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity." I Samuel 2:1: "Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the Lord: mine horn is exalted in the Lord; my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation." Ps. 16:9: "My heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth; my flesh also shall rest in hope." Acts 5:41: "They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name." From these and multitudes of other passages, it is most manifest, as well as from the very nature of the case, that the acceptable service of God must constitute the present happiness of the soul.

6. These two kinds of service may be distinguished from each other in the fact that a legal service affords to the mind very little present satisfaction, which consists in a self-righteous peace, and the anticipation of future happiness. In proof of this I observe that the very nature of the case shows that it must be so. Inasmuch as it is not chosen for its own sake and that in which the mind supremely delights on its own account, it is often a laborious and irksome business. It is something submitted to which is not pleasant in itself, but on account of an anticipated reward. Such a man is religious for the same reason that some people take bitter medicine. The medicine is disagreeable in itself; but submitted to for the sake of an anticipated good. It is taken as the less of two evils. So a man may toil hard for the sake of his wages; but toil is not desired for its own sake, but only submitted to for the sake of the end. Just so with a legal religion. It is an up-hill business. It is regarded as the less of two evils. It is something that must not be omitted, but attended to from the dire necessity of the case. But not consisting in benevolence, not being disinterestedly loved for its own sake, it cannot, in the very nature of the case, constitute the mind's present happiness. And the principal happiness which the mind can feel in it, is just that kind of satisfaction which a man may take in labor for the sake of the end he has in view. He would gladly forego the labor, could the end be obtained without it; but since it cannot, he submits to the labor, just in proportion as he regards the end. So when a man's convictions of the validity of religion, of the danger of hell, and the desirableness of heaven, are vivid in his own mind, he engages in the duties of religion, with a good degree of alacrity, feeling, and sensible satisfaction. Just as a man would feel a kind of satisfaction in his labor, who had a prospect of a great reward. But as soon as his convictions of sin, of danger, &c., subside, just in this proportion his religion becomes an irksome business. His prayers are short and far between, and the whole round of what he calls his religious duties drags heavily, and are a sad weight upon his shoulders. In short, his religion is slavery. It is more tolerable than hell; but it has not in it the unction and sweetness of heaven.

VI. If any man would serve the Lord, he must begin by making his heart holy.

1. God says to the wicked, "Make to yourself a new heart and a new spirit." This is the very beginning of all religion, to give up selfishness and become supremely, disinterestedly benevolent.

2. As a holy heart consists in this, it is impossible that any other service can be acceptable to God. Indeed it is in reality the only service that is really offered to God. A legal service is self service. It is laboring for wages. It is not doing good for the love of doing good, and for the sake of the good, but merely for the sake of the wages, and is therefore not the service of God but of self. Those therefore who have unholy

hearts "cannot serve the Lord, because He is a holy God." Until they are holy they cannot engage in a holy service. When Joshua told the people they could not serve the Lord, because He is a holy God, he did not intend to tell them that they could not become holy, but that remaining unholy, they could not serve the Lord. You, therefore, who are unholy, must not think to set about the acceptable service of God without first becoming holy. This is your first work.

3. It is the only service that can do you any good. God cannot honestly reward a legal service by the gift of eternal life, because there is not a particle of real virtue in it. Nor can He possibly reward a legal service with eternal life; for what is eternal life but holiness and its necessary results. It is absurd, therefore, to suppose that God can give you eternal life as the reward of legal service. Nor can you receive eternal life as the gift of grace, while your heart is not holy and you are not rendering to God a holy and acceptable service. It should be forever understood that if a man does not find his happiness in benevolence and in that course of life which God requires, he neither deserves to be happy, nor is it possible for God to make him happy. If he does not love his work, he does not deserve any reward for it, because his heart is not in it. Nor is it possible that he should be rewarded for his labor, unless he finds a sweetness and an enjoyment in the labor itself. Why heaven will not consist in supineness and inaction, in giving yourself up to the exercise of sweet emotions and ecstasies without benevolence and effort, but must consist in the service of God. If you are not engaged in that kind of service here which makes you happy, the same kind of service will not make you happy in heaven.

4. If your legal service does good to others, it is no thanks to you. If through your legal and selfish efforts others are blessed, really converted and saved, it is not because you have had this end supremely in view, as one desired and chosen for its own sake. Therefore whoever may be blessed, you are not blessed and do not deserve to be. The conversion of souls does not fill you with joy and satisfaction, because it is not the end which you have chosen for its own sake. You do not find your reward in the very luxury of promoting the good of others. You are deceiving yourself in the anticipation of a future reward for mere legal services. This is a horrible delusion.

5. But in all probability you will do no good in this state of mind; for it seems to be a universal law that "like shall beget like"--slaves shall beget slaves--that being a legalist yourself, you will beget proselytes in your own likeness. Christ said of the Pharisees, "ye do compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him two fold more the child of hell than yourselves." If you have not in your own experience, gone any farther than a legal religion, your spiritual children will be legalists. You may make converts, but they will not be Christians. They may be zealous, a great change may occur in them; but they will not be converts to Jesus Christ. They will not know what the true mind of God is, because you have never really and fully exhibited it to them, either in your preaching, or your temper and life. Your converts will as a general thing, fall even below you, and be two fold more the children of legality and of hell than yourself.

REMARKS.

1. If your religion does not afford you present happiness, if you do not feel that there is real salvation in it, it is a legal and not a gospel religion. Beloved, there is a sad mistake upon this subject among professing Christians. Instead of finding their religion a peace-giving, soul-satisfying employment, they think themselves to be engaged in what they call the Christian warfare, and expect to be made happy when they get to heaven, and can cease from their irksome labors. They drag on against their feelings, and elaborate a most distressing religion. The more they have of it, the more miserable they are. They keep up

a continual controversy between their conscience and their hearts, supposing this inward struggle to constitute the Christian warfare. They bless themselves with the idea that their painful service will soon be over, and they shall have nothing to do but sit down in the midst of the joys of heaven.

Now the Christian warfare consists in conflicts with those temptations, persecutions and besetments, that endeavor to draw us aside from the labor in which we take so much delight. The true Christian's religion is his life. When he is left to pursue his course of doing good without opposition or temptation, he finds the service itself to be the delight and satisfaction of his soul. He knows full well that the grand difference between heaven and this state of existence lies in the fact that there he will have less interruption, temptation and resistance, and can therefore give himself up uninterruptedly and without fighting Satan, to that service in which he has so long had supreme delight. Is this your religion?

2. There is reason to believe that many of what are called revivals of religion go no farther than to make the converts mere legalists, and that the converts never get fairly into the kingdom of God. They are awakened and more or less deeply convicted, but never come to be possessed of the idea that religion is love, while their hearts remain entirely selfish. They are deceived by the vividness of their emotions and the excitement of their minds, into a belief that they are truly converted to God. In proof of this position, observe--

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