

The Ways of Sin Hard; of Holiness, Pleasant

by Charles Finney

True religion is a natural state of mind that is easy, peace-giving, and delightful, while a life of sin is a hard state of constant warfare against God and against all created beings.

Scripture: Proverbs 13:15, Isaiah 57:20, Acts 9:5

Topics: "True Religion", "Sin vs. Holiness"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the stark contrast between the hard ways of sin and the pleasant paths of holiness, illustrating that true religion is a heartfelt devotion to God that brings peace and joy. He explains that sin leads to constant turmoil and dissatisfaction, while a life devoted to God is naturally easy and fulfilling. Finney argues that true religion requires repentance, confidence in God, and a commitment to love others, which ultimately leads to a harmonious existence. He warns that a life of selfishness is a path of self-destruction, while embracing God's ways results in true happiness and fulfillment. The sermon calls for individuals to recognize the futility of sin and the joy found in a relationship with God.

Transcript

The following passages present the subject on which I propose to speak.

"The way of transgressors is hard."--Prov. 13:15

"It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks."--Acts 9:5

"But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt.

"There is no peace, said my God, to the wicked."--Isaiah 57:20, 21

"Come unto me, all ye that labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

"For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"--Matthew 11:29-30

"And his commandments are not grievous." --1 John 5:3

"Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."--Prov. 3:17

You will at once perceive the drift and meaning of these passages, many of which are found in all parts of the Bible. Their general doctrine is that the ways of sin are full of trouble, but that the ways of holiness are

pleasant and peaceful. It will be my present object to illustrate this doctrine; to show that it must of necessity be true; and hence that whatever claims to be true religion and yet dissents from this doctrine cannot be true.

To compass these ends I must,

I. Enquire what true religion is;

II. What is implied in it;

III. What sin is;

IV. What a life of sin implies;

V. Show that religion is naturally easy and delightful;

VI. That on the contrary a course of sin is and must be, hard, oppressive, delusive and self-ruinous.

I. What is true religion?

To say all in a word, it is true devotion of heart and life to God. It supposes that instead of living to yourself, you live to God. You seek to consecrate all your powers to his service only. According to the Bible, true religion is supreme love to God, and equal, impartial love to man. It is not a state of passive emotion, but of supreme devotion to God. It manifests itself in good will to all beings, and in a voluntary committal of all our powers to God and to the good of all his creatures, so far as they become known to us.

II. True religion implies many things. In all the case of all sinners it must imply repentance--the turning of the heart away from all iniquity, and the utter rejection of all sin. This must be the first great step from sin to holiness.

It also must imply confidence in God and in his general veracity. When the heart turns round to become God's friend, it must confide in him as good and as truthful.

There will also be a state of warm and lively confidence in Jesus Christ, embracing all those points in which He reveals himself as our Savior from sin and condemnation.

There will also be a state of universal acquiescence in the providence of God. Believing in the fact that God rules in nature over all the external and internal worlds, the mind accepts this fact with joy and with trust. The mind being in a state of trust towards God and of true devotion to his will, this acquiescence in his general providence sits easy and is natural. Hence there will be an earnest sympathy with God in all his ways.

III. On the other hand, we must enquire, What is sin? Sin is devotion to self. Sin puts self in the place of God as the supreme object of regard and affection. It values nothing except as related to self. It makes self-gratification its first law.

Of course this implies opposition to God and stubborn impenitence. The man cleaves pertinaciously to self, and is ready to sacrifice everything else to promote selfish ends. He is utterly distrustful of God, and has no sympathy with his character, government and ways.

IV. Sinning, unrestrained by gospel grace, and made the law of life as it always is in the unrenowned soul, will of course imply a supreme devotion to some forms of selfish gratification. The man aims to provide for himself. His passions and appetites may be more or less elevated; his choice among numerous modes of self-gratification is a matter of taste and training; but he may always be known by the fact that whatever his heart craves he gives himself up to obtain and enjoy. The sum of the whole matter is that his soul is selfish.

V. Religion is altogether a natural state of mind, easy, peace-giving and delightful. Its exercises are in entire accordance and with our constitutional nature and with the nature and relations of things. In a religious state of mind, man is in harmony with himself. Each function of his active powers performs its appropriate work, without friction and irritation. The affirmations of reason and the monitions of conscience are heard with quiet joy and are duly honored. The legitimate demands of animal nature are met, and the soul is not thereby brought into bondage. The social law of his nature finds ample scope in the new and glorious field of communion with the Father and with the Son Jesus Christ. A truly religious man is in harmony with God and with all his manifestations. He loves the law; he loves the gospel. Seeing God in all the ways of his providence he rejoices to know that here too is the land of his Father, doing all things well. Thus coming into contact with God in every point, and being at peace and in harmony with all God is and does, how can he be otherwise than blessed?

By the same natural law, his relations towards his fellow beings are all easy and naturally peaceful. He accords to them, to each and to all,--their rights, and does it with real gratification. He enjoys seeing and making them happy. Hence he does not come into collision with them, as a selfish man is likely to, everyday. In reference to them also, his own mind feels self-respect, instead of being harassed with self-reproaches. Thus he finds himself at peace with all the universe of created beings, and each one, as he becomes known, heightens the peace and joy of his soul. His mind works in harmony with all true motives; conscience smiles on his soul all along his way. It is a sunny way; for God sheds the light of his face upon it; all holy beings shine and smile upon it. This representation is true not occasionally and under special circumstances only, but necessarily and always where true piety prevails.

Old bad habits are molded and yielded as soon as the will and conscience come fully under the power of this law of love to God and man. Consequently, the tone of his mind becomes more and more easy and flowing, as the selfishness that chafes and irritates is subdued and rooted out. His bosom becomes the natural home of peace and joy, intruders and disturbers being thrust out.

The Bible represents this course as like the shining light of morning, which, from the faintest streaks, shineth more and more unto the perfect day. This is its natural law. Joy and peace must advance with progress in obedience and self-subjugation to God's will. This state must be intensely delightful because all the work in which God calls the Christian to engage is pleasant, and just what he most of all loves. These are not the labors of a slave, but of a free man, working for an object, with a heart and therefore "with a will." He makes God's glory his own end, the very thing in which he chiefly delights. Hence all he has to do is to promote his own highest interests, for he has identified his own highest interests with God's honor.

He has a glorious fellowship. No longer in universal warfare with God, and all the good in heaven and in earth, he is at peace with all, and in most refreshing sympathy. His enemies now are not the good and the mighty, but the bad and the weak. God is on his side, and his friends have God on their side. Against him are the world, the flesh and the devil; but for him are friends, more and mightier,--God, his angels, and all

the good in earth or heaven. Well and fitly does the Bible speak of him as "more than a conqueror through Him who has loved us."

The scriptures do not deny that the good man has conflicts. No, they really recognize this fact; but they provide for him all the armor he wants; and pledge him the strong aid of the Almighty God besides.

I am speaking now of a state of true religion, not of legality. Many seem to misunderstand this subject. They talk as if this world must be dull and comfortless, and as if God had made it as bad as He well could. But this is a most blasphemous representation. When the Bible speaks of the present state as a warfare, it always represents the believing soul as gaining victories through Jesus Christ, his Lord. He conquers through abounding grace, and thus finds peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.

On the contrary a course of sin is a hard state. The way of transgressors, we have the best authority for saying, is hard. It is all unnatural, in the sense of a violation of the laws of our being. It deranges and tramples down each and every one of these laws. The mind conflicts with itself and wars perfectly against its own judgment and conscience. It also wars upon its own best interests; and not least, against the truth. God made the human mind to move in harmony with truth. But sin is a state of eternal antagonism against truth, and therefore must inevitably be one of disquiet and wretchedness.

This state of sin is necessarily one of warfare with all the wicked, for selfish men are by natural law at loggerheads with each other. Each man, having a supremely selfish interest to maintain, finds himself thoroughly in conflict with every other supremely selfish man. Notice their locks and bolts and bars. See how they build up their walls of protection against each other. The laws they make against all forms of selfish aggression upon property and the care they manifest to put everything in writing, show that they have no confidence in wicked men as generally honest. Surely God does not make men to devour each other like beasts of prey. Nor did He make man to live like the swine, regarding the indulgence of his appetites and passions as his chief concern. Surely such a course of living must be for man, such as he is made, most unnatural.

Sin is, of course, a constant warfare against God and against all the interests of God's great family and kingdom.

I said it was a state of universal warfare. And truly there is not a being, not a creature under heaven, against whom the sinner is not at war. He fights every man, every beast. He would lay the whole universe under contribution to minister to his own selfish enjoyment. He would lay his commands on God if he could. If he resorts to prayer instead of command, it is only because he finds he cannot command to any purpose. He prays only in hope thereby to make God his own servant. He cares no more for God than for the devil, only as his aid may be of more value to himself. If he could, how soon would he engross the universe to make it subservient to his own selfish ends! Gladly would he command and appropriate all the fishes of the sea and the cattle of a thousand hills. If it might subserve his own selfish ends, he would blot out the sun in the heavens, little caring how many equally good with himself were thereby doomed to eternal darkness. But you say--"Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing?" "I never thought of doing such things!" Stay! Let me tell you the only reason why you have not. It is only because you have never supposed you could. Just as you have never thought of being king of England or President of the United States; yet if the way were open and you could reach either of these summits or power by a little sacrifice of your conscience, would you not do it? Certainly you would! Who would trust you to be disinterested and to act according to a sound conscience? No man. But what have you not done? A man

who would do a little meanness for a sixpence would do a great villainy for a kingdom. A man who would quibble for a cent would do more than quibble for governmental office and patronage.

Thus sin throws everything into utter and interminable disorder. It is war, war, WAR on all interests--against God and against all created beings! Of course, there can be no rest to the guilty soul, day or night. Forcefully does the Bible say of the wicked--"He is like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt." Did you ever stand on the shore of the sea and look down upon its restless waters, as they rolled up masses of mud and filth, boiling and surging perpetually? I have, and as I looked I thought of this striking and beautiful passage, and have sighed to think how truthful its representations are.

Sin is a constant failure. The sinner never can realize his own expectations. You find it so, and the more as you advance the farther in your career. Some of you are yet young and have not yet had so much bitter experience of disappointment as you are destined to have if you still press on in your career of sin. Now you dance along on the top waves of pleasure; yet you must confess you have already seen one bubble burst after another, just at the moment when you thought you had almost seized a treasure. But you still expect to catch the most of them and to find ample enjoyment yet in sin. Alas, you need not hope to outdo all the sinners who have gone before you! You need not think to nullify all the laws of your being! You need not flatter yourself you shall yet baffle the Almighty and disprove his fearful threats against the sinner!

These older men and women;--have they found their fill of joy in sin? Oh no. Your desire has enlarged itself as hell and is never satisfied. The more you get, the more you fail in your purpose as to real happiness.--You are working against all the relations in which you are placed. The whole of your wicked selfish life is a struggle for vanity, and must therefore, inevitably, prove a failure. John Jacob Astor said, near the close of his life, after he had amassed millions--"My life has been a perfect failure." Perhaps few men have meant more by these words than he. Indeed the more you think you get, the more you make yourself wretched. With great wealth comes great care and trouble. Solid happiness is not there.

Political ambition is a great snare to the soul. A young student says, "I will study law and become a statesman. I will devote myself to politics and rise in the world." Suppose you try and suppose you succeed even to your highest expectations. By incessant scheming and unwearied effort you get up step by step, till you become a member of the State Legislature, and at last, of Congress. What now? Pause and ask how much you have really gained in the line of the happiness you are so earnestly seeking. Are you a whit more happy than when you had your first election and were made a constable? Not at all more. The higher you ascend, the more you must become the tool of a party, and consequently the more really degraded you must be. You are after honor. Think of that--after honor! Look at the career and final end of Daniel Webster! Who ever struggled harder to climb the steep of official preferment than he! Yet he is dead; and now it comes to this that the greatest and the best thing which can be said of his commendation is that he died a Christian! There seems to be no point which his eulogists are more anxious to make out than this;--with how much difficulty, I need not stop to say.

But, did he live a happy life? I am not aware that anybody claims this for him. And how, of Clay and Calhoun? Does any man claim that they were happy men while they lived? No. Every intelligent man knows the contrary. Webster ran away from religious life and gave himself up to political aspirations; but what is the result after all? There is no higher or better thing sought to be proved of him than that he died a Christian. Andrew Jackson retired from the Presidency and made profession of religion. This was the

acme of his honor. Nothing else do his eulogists seize upon with so much interest after his death. And verily, "the Christian is the highest style of man." I was once struck with the remark made by the President of a College. He said he should honor his station and do nothing to its discredit. I thought then, Is this true honor? Is this a correct principle? Is the honor of being President of a college to be one moment compared with the honor of being a Christian, a son and an heir of God? But to pass by this as comparatively nothing and to speak of the honor of a President's station as if this were to be made law in morals and propriety, is surely anything but reasonable.

A course of sin is a course of constant failure to realize present expectations. Sinners are always aiming at what they never attain. With unwearied diligence they seek happiness, but evermore in those directions where it is not to be found. Their life is made up of constant lusting, sometimes for one thing, sometimes for another. Even the young who have least experience in the disappointments of earth, are fully aware, whenever they allow themselves to think, that their pursuits of real good are futile. The entire course of sin is hard work and poor pay, and poor keeping besides; and to make the case yet worse, incessant rebukes from his conscience and his better judgment, all his best friends. It must be seen that this is a bad case.

I have said that sin is an unnatural state. But you will perhaps say to me, I find it very natural for me to sin.

What do you mean by that? I am aware that, if you set your heart upon selfish good, it may be very natural, in one sense, for you to use means to secure it. Yet it is utterly impossible that this should be a natural course in reference to your own constitution, or to your relations to God, to man, or to your own conscience.

REMARKS.

1. It is easy to see why the Bible always represents sinners as being fools. "Madness is in their hearts while they live." "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." Such is its language; and the reason of it we can realize in their vain and foolish labor. Solomon set his heart to exhaust every fountain of earthly good. No man can hope to have better facilities for the work than he, or more ample resources. He left on record the results of all his experiments. One word tells the story: "Vanity!" "Vanity of vanities;--all is vanity!" It was not through any failure of means for making a fair trial: it was a necessary failure; a failure founded in the nature of things; in the utter lack of adaptation in such objects, so sought, to satisfy a being so constituted. Man's nature cannot be altered. His relations as a subject of God's government, and as a member of society, are changeless. Hence, if he gives himself up to selfishness, he defeats himself, and only all the more certainly by how much the more ample his resources and elevated his position. The higher he stands, the more he interferes with other interests, and the more palpably he violates the laws of social order.

2. This is not saying that the world has no good in it, provided it be used as it should be. I will not disparage the pleasures of this world, nor anything else God has made. God has not put creatures here to starve them of earthly good. The failure grows wholly out of abuse. Let a man of Solomon's means take an opposite course from his; fall directly and fully in with God's great plan; set himself to do all the good he can; and he will enjoy everything. The very flowers of his garden, which before rebuked his selfish heart, will now smile upon him and regale him with their fragrance. The fact is, a man may enjoy any virtuous course of life, in any sphere of activity, only let him live for God, and serve his generation according to God's will. Take any of the professions or pursuits in common life--suppose the young man enters life as a lawyer, and devotes all his powers to doing good, aiming honestly to promote the public interests and the

highest general welfare. He must succeed. People will push him forward, step after step; they will put him up because they, as a public, have interests to be served, and they know that he is the man to be trusted to serve them. They see he is not ambitious. This lawyer need not violate his conscience. He rises as fast as any man need to, without. He lives in peace with his own conscience, and dying, he can lie down in peace. His experience presents a case of one who uses the world as not abusing it. He does not live so that after his death, the living tax their wits to the utmost to persuade themselves that he has not gone down straight to hell. Every man spontaneously says, He has gone to his heavenly reward.

3. We see that legalists and formalists labor under a great delusion. They claim to be serving God, but they find his service intolerably hard. I must, he says, I must do this and I must do that. O, it is a hard service! So many meetings--how can he stand it? So much to be done in order to be on good terms with his conscience, and to keep up a good Christian name;--what can he do? Now suppose this legalist had a great deal more of this same religion; suppose his time were filled up with it from early morn till the hour of sleep--nothing but meetings and religious duties; and all felt to be intolerably hard;--would this become the life and bliss of his soul, or its misery? Would this be heaven, or hell? Now, is it not obvious that such a religion is altogether a delusion?

4. These legal and formal religionists are a great stumbling block to the church and to the world. They misrepresent religion and scandalize it before both saints and sinners. How remarkable is the fact that they introduce a new sort of phraseology into Christian experience, in which you hear continually of burdens, trials, crosses; but never, as in the scriptures, of "joys that pass all understand," and "peace as a river," and "fellowship with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

5. It is easy to see why sinners think religion must conflict with their present happiness. It is because they see so little of the genuine article, and so much of the counterfeit. It is rare, for example, that they see a mother whose mild, Christian influence throws a heavenly charm over the entire circle of her family and of the society in which she moves. But on the other hand, you find those whose piety is hard, whose souls are in bondage, who go to prayer meeting full of complaints, and who, regarding religion as all of grace, yet assume that this grace is almost unattainable; that God is exceedingly slow to grant it; who in fact will tell you, that since the fall no mere man has been able, with all the grace he could get or God could give, to obey the whole law, but must daily break it in thought, word and deed. How different is this from the Bible. This affirms that "His commandments are not grievous." This promises, "with every temptation, to provide a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it." According to the Bible, it is the sinner's life which is hard; but the Christian life is as the shining light, a walking with God, a joy unspeakable and full of glory. It is indeed represented as a warfare; yet one, which through grace, may be a simple succession of victories and triumphs. It is no doubt true that those who are not converted until they have formed strong habits of vicious indulgence, must have conflicts before they can eradicate and subdue their propensities to sin; but if they take hold of promised grace as they may, they shall go on from strength to strength. As faithful Christians grow older, they usually find greater peace. They know that Christ will bruise Satan under their feet shortly, and the flesh also. At worst, their warfare is not to be compared with that of the sinner. See the sinner smitten of affliction--the hand of God heavy upon him--wife or husband low in death, where can he go for refuge? Alas! there is no hand to bind up his wounds! He cannot look to God--he has no Savior!

But the Christian, smitten of affliction, flies to his Savior's bosom. Does his property "take wings?" Let it go; his chief treasures are ensured in heaven. Losses cannot crush him as they do the sinner. Often you see him greatly joyful under trials so severe as might drive a sinner to distraction.

Sometimes the sinner throws a loose rein on his selfishness, and allows himself in little dishonesties in business. Soon he finds himself uneasy, suspected, and withal, troubled in conscience. A hard time has he, when his old friends begin to say in under tones, "It is best to look out for him; he may possibly be an honest man, but we had better look sharp." Soon there comes down upon him a chilling suspension of confidence, and if he never did before, he does now find that the way of the transgressor is hard.

How often we see sinners afraid of God's hand in providence. "A dreadful sound is in his ears." There is a fearful thunder-storm abroad; the cold chills run over him; dread horrors fill his soul; to whom can he fly for refuge? Ah! he knows nothing of that peace, which, even amid such scenes, the true Christian enjoys!

Compare the sinner with the Christian under the sudden rush of great calamity. There was Job, a venerable Christian. He staggered a moment under the dreadful pressure of so many and so heavy afflictions; yet see how his soul rallied and still held on trustfully to the arm of the Lord. A worldly man, so tempted, would no doubt have cursed God and died! But having true faith, the afflicted soul will say, "God knows why this comes upon me. Surely I can trust all my case in his hands. Sickness and death cannot come otherwise than by his permission."

The great peace which reposes at the bottom of the Christian's mind under the pressure of great affliction is most admirable, and often really sublime. Property, health, friends, are swept away; yet their anchor lies deep among the great rocks of Jehovah's attributes, and the mighty ship holds steady amid the storm. Like a vessel whose great keel lies so low in the deep waters, that it heeds not the ruffled surface of the sea, so his soul reposes deeply in God, and knows little of the storms that howl or the waves that dash upon the surface. When you thought to find him walking his room in anguish, you are surprised to find him sleeping peacefully as a babe on its mother's bosom. Angels fan him with their wings, and the spirit of faith and promise soothes his brow.

Many forget that sin is in any respect a warfare and a conflict. If they could only be safe in sin, they think all would be well. Hence they speak only of the danger, not of the wrong and wickedness of a life of sin. How great is their mistake! Let it never be granted, that a life of sin, in its best estate, is better than holiness in its place, even for its present results. By the necessary laws of mind, so long as the mind acts benevolently, and is right towards God, the present results will be pleasant, and even blessed. Hence, sinners need not assume that in becoming Christians, they forego the pleasures of life and submit to the bitterness of religion! They need not think of religion as they do of the surgeon's amputating knife; as if religion were little else but sacrifice, hard labor, a hard life and poor pay at that.

Sinners have their trials too, as well as Christians; but without those precious consolations. But in comparison with each other, a sinner and a Christian--take each from the same walks of life, with the same culture, and the same nervous constitution--you see the Christian full of sensibility, but cleaving to Christ; tried sorely, yet deeply reposing on the bosom of Jesus. The other is tossed perpetually, yet not comforted; has no resting place--is full of trouble. He cries out, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." But the Christian says--God has prospered me and I have enjoyed all he has given me. Everything has been doubly dear to me because it has been the gift of God. O! he says, my life has been a sunny way. I have indeed been sick, and I have been well; but everything I have received has been good for me, and has worked out good for my soul. The sinner, right over against this, can only say, "I have had a great deal of trouble; all trouble! trouble!" You have had some good things? "Yes, but--but--" You have had some honors? "Yes, but--but--"

Come to the Christian's couch of death; wipe away the cold sweat, and mark how his face is radiant with joy and peace. He can hardly talk about his trials, so sweetly has he enjoyed them all. Has your time come? "Yes," and turning away he says, "I am ready to go. May God give me patience to wait all his appointed time till my change come!" When Elder Marks was near death, he was called upon to sign his name. He made the effort, but found himself unable to do it. "Glory to God!" cried he, "I am so near heaven, I cannot even write my own name! Are you not glad? Cannot you all rejoice with me?"

Now go, see the sinner. See how bitter his life has been. He lost his wife, and it nearly killed him. His children died, and where could he go for consolation? "Alas," said he, "I had prosperity, but it seemed only to curse me. I had health, but I abused it. I had wealth, but it did me no good. Dark, dark! all is dark in the past. All, too, is dark in the present." Don't tell him he is about to die--his physician dare not trust it, lest it shock his nerves and destroy all the good effect he hopes to get from his medicines. Be silent as the grave; suppress your tears; turn away from this heart-rending scene. God will soon "drive him away in his wickedness; but the righteous hath hope in his death."

It only remains that I ask you why you will go on in this course. You have nothing to gain by sin. Why should you throw away your immortal soul?

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