

# Fearing God for Selfish Reasons

Charles Finney

They feared the LORD, and served their own gods.

2 Kings 17:33

When the ten tribes of Israel were carried away captive by the king of Assyria, their places were supplied with strangers of different idolatrous nations, who knew nothing of the religion of the Jews. Very soon the wild beasts increased in the country, and the lions destroyed multitudes of the people, and they thought it was because they did not know the god of the country, and had therefore ignorantly transgressed his religion, and offended him, and he had sent the lions among them as a punishment.

So they applied to the king, who told them to get one of the priests of the Israelites to teach them the manner of the god of the land. They took this advice, and obtained one of the priests to come to Bethel and teach them the religious ceremonies and modes of worship that had been practiced there. And he taught them to fear Jehovah, as the God of that country. But still they did not receive him as the only God. They feared him; that is, they feared his anger and his judgments, and to avert these, they performed the prescribed rites. But they “served” their own gods. They kept up their idolatrous worship, and this was what they loved and preferred, though they felt obliged to pay some reverence to Jehovah, as the God of that country. There are still multitudes of persons, professing to fear God, and perhaps possessing a certain kind of the fear of the Lord, who, nevertheless, serve their own gods. They have other things to which their hearts are supremely devoted, and other objects in which they mainly put their trust.

There are, as you know, two kinds of fear. There is that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom, which is founded in love. There is also a slavish fear, which is a mere dread of evil, and is purely selfish. This is the kind of fear which is possessed by those people spoken of in the text. They were afraid Jehovah would send his judgments upon them, if they did not perform certain rites and this was the motive they had for paying him worship. Those who have this fear are supremely selfish, and while they profess to reverence Jehovah, have other gods whom they love and serve.

There are several classes of persons to whom this is applicable, and my object tonight is to describe some of them, in such a way, that those of you here, who possess this character, may know yourselves, and may see how it is that your neighbors know you and understand your real characters.

To serve a person is to be obedient to the will and devoted to the interests of that individual. It is not properly called serving where only certain acts are performed, without entering into the service of the person; but to serve, is to make it a business to do the will and promote the interest of the person. To serve God is to make religion the main business of life. It is to devote one’s self, heart, life, powers, time, influence, and all, to promote the interests of God, to build up the kingdom of God, and to advance the glory of God. Who are they who, while they profess to fear the Lord, serve their own gods?

**There are many who make religion consist in certain acts of piety that do not interfere with their selfishness.**

**1. I answer, first, all those of you who have not heartily and practically renounced the ownership of your possessions, and given them up to God.**

It is self-evident that if you have not done this, you are not serving God. Suppose a gentleman were to employ a clerk to take care of his store, and suppose the clerk were to continue to attend to his own business, and when asked to do what is necessary for his employer, who pays him his wages, he should reply, “I really have so much business of my own to attend to, that I have no time to do these things.” Would not everybody cry out against such a servant, and say he was not serving his employer at all, his time is not his own, it is paid for, and he but

served himself? So where a man has not renounced the ownership of himself, not only in thought, but practically, he has not taken the first lesson in religion.<sup>1</sup> He is not serving the Lord, but serving his own gods.

**2. That man who does not make the business in which he is engaged a part of his religion does not serve God.**

You hear a man say, sometimes, "I am so much engaged all day in the world, or in worldly business, that I have not time to serve God."

He thinks he serves God a little while in the morning, and then attends to his worldly business. That man, you may rely on it, left his religion where he said his prayers. He is willing, perhaps, to give God the time before breakfast, before he gets ready to go to his own business; but as soon as that is over, away he goes to his own work. He fears the Lord enough, perhaps, to go through his prayers night and morning, but he serves his own gods. That man's religion is the laughingstock of hell! He prays very devoutly, and then, instead of engaging in his business for God, he is serving himself. No doubt the idols are well satisfied with the arrangement, but God is wholly displeased.

**3. But again: Those of you are serving your own gods, who devote to Jehovah that which costs you little or nothing.**

There are many who make religion consist in certain acts of piety that do not interfere with their selfishness. You pray in the morning in your family, because you can do it then very conveniently, but do not allow the service of Jehovah to interfere with the service of your gods, or to stand in the way of your getting rich, or enjoying the world. The gods you serve make no complaint of being slighted or neglected for the service of Jehovah.

<sup>1</sup> Finney uses the word "religion" in a positive way in this article, not in the modern negative (and wrong) sense that some Christians use it, as in the saying, "I don't have religion; I have Jesus." There is nothing wrong with "religion." See James 1:26-27.

**4. All that class are serving their own gods, who suppose that the six days of the week belong to themselves, and that the Sabbath<sup>2</sup> only is God's day.**

There are multitudes who suppose that the week is man's time, and the Sabbath only God's, and that they have a right to do their own work during the week, and to serve themselves, and promote their own interests, if they will only keep the Sabbath strictly, and serve God on the Sabbath. For instance: a celebrated preacher, in



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illustrating the wickedness of breaking the Sabbath, used this illustration: "Suppose a man, having seven dollars in his pocket, should meet a beggar in great distress, and give him six dollars, keeping only one for himself; and the beggar, seeing that he retained one dollar, should return and rob him of that; would not every heart despise his baseness?" You see it embodies this idea that it is very ungrateful to break the Sabbath since God has given to men six days for their own, to serve themselves, and only reserved the Sabbath to himself, and to rob God of

the seventh day is base ingratitude.

You that do this do not serve God at all. If you are selfish during the week, you are selfish altogether. To suppose you had any real piety would imply that you were converted every Sabbath and unconverted every Monday. If a man would serve himself all the week and really possess religion on the Sabbath, he requires to be converted for it. But is this the idea of the Sabbath, that it is a day to serve God in exclusive of other days? Is God in need of your services on the Sabbath to keep his work on?

God requires all your services as much on the six days as on the Sabbath, only he has appropriated the Sabbath to peculiar duties, and required its observance as a day of rest from bodily toil and from those fatiguing cares and labors that concern the present world. But because God uses means in accomplishing his purposes, and men have

<sup>2</sup> He is referring to Sunday, although he calls it the Sabbath. This was customary use of the word "Sabbath" at that time among many Americans.

bodies as well as souls, and the gospel is to be spread and sustained by the things of this world, therefore God requires you to work all the six days at your secular employments. But it is all for his service, as much as the worship of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is no more given for the service of God than Monday. You have no more right to serve yourselves on Monday than you have on the Sabbath. If any of you have thus considered the matter, and imagined that the six days of the week were your own time, it shows that you are supremely selfish. I beg of you not to consider that in prayer and on the Sabbath you are serving God at all, if the rest of the time you are considered as serving yourself. You have never known the radical principle of serving the Lord.

**5. Those are serving themselves, or their own gods, who will not make any sacrifices of personal ease and comfort in religion.**

For instance, there are multitudes who object to free churches<sup>3</sup> on this ground, that they require a sacrifice of personal gratification. They talk like this: "We wish to sit with our families," or "We want our seats cushioned," or "We always like to sit in the same place." They admit that free churches are necessary, in order to make the gospel accessible to the thousands that are going to hell in this city. But they cannot make these little sacrifices, to throw open the doors of God's house to this mass of impenitent sinners.

These little things often indicate most clearly the state of men's hearts. Suppose your servant were to say, "I cannot do this," or "I cannot do that," because it interferes with his personal ease and comfort. He cannot do this because he likes to sit on a cushion and work. Or he cannot do that because it would separate him from his family an hour and a half. What! is that doing service? When a man enters into service he gives up his ease and comfort for the interest and at the will of his employer. Is it true that any man is supremely devoted to the service of God, when he shows that his own ease and comfort are dearer than the kingdom of Jesus Christ, and that he would sooner sacri-

fice the salvation of sinners than sit on a hard seat, or be separated from his family an hour or two?

**6. Those are serving their own gods, who give their time and money, but they give grudgingly, by constraint, and not of a ready mind and with a cheerful heart.**

What would you think of your servant, if you had to dun<sup>4</sup> or drive him all the time, to do anything for your interest?

Would you not say he was an eye-servant? How many people there are, who when they do anything on account of religion, do it grudgingly? If they do anything, it comes hard. If you go to one of these characters, and want his time or his money for any religious object it is difficult to get him engaged. It seems to go across the grain and is not easy or natural. It is plain he does not consider the interests of Christ's kingdom the same with his own. He may make a show of fearing the Lord, but he "serves" some other gods of his own.

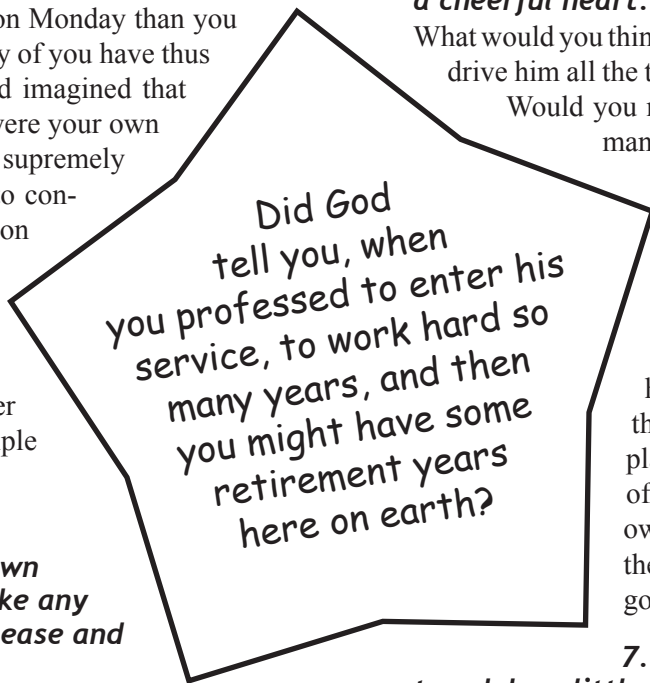
**7. Those who are always ready to ask how little they may do for religion rather than how much they may do, are serving their own gods.**

There are multitudes of persons who seem always to ask how little they can get along with in what they do for God.

You hear such a man making up his accounts of profit and loss: "So much made this year; then so much it costs for charity, so much obliged to give for religion (OBLIGED to give for the interests of religion!), and so much lost by fire, and so much by bad debts," and so on. Is that man serving God? It is a simple matter of fact that you have never set your hearts on the object of promoting religion in the world. If you had, you would ask, "How much can I do for this object and for that? Cannot I do more?"

**8. They who are laying up wealth for their families, to elevate and aggrandize them, are serving gods of their own, and not Jehovah.**

Those who are thus aiming to elevate their own families into a different sphere, by laying up wealth for them, show that they have some other object to live for than bringing this world under the authority of Jesus Christ. They have other gods to serve. They may pretend to fear the Lord, but they "serve" their own gods.



<sup>3</sup> Referring to the idea of rented pews, versus a chapel where first-come-first-served seating is used.

<sup>4</sup> To ask for payment.

**9. Those who are making it their object to accumulate so much property that they can retire from business and live at ease are serving their own gods.**

There are many persons who profess to be the servants of God, but are eagerly engaged in gathering property, and calculating to retire to their country seat by and by, and live at their ease. What do you mean? Has God given you a right to a perpetual Sabbath, as soon as you have made so much money? Did God tell you, when you professed to enter his service, to work hard so many years, and then you might have a perpetual holiday? Did he promise to excuse you after that from making the most of your time and talents, and let you live at ease the rest of your days? If your thoughts are set upon this notion, I tell you, you are not serving God but your own selfishness and sloth.

**10. Persons are serving their own gods who would sooner gratify their appetites than deny themselves things that are unnecessary, or even hurtful, for the sake of doing good.**

You find persons that greatly love things that do them no good, and others even form an artificial appetite for the thing positively loathsome, and after it they will go, and no arguments will prevail upon them to abandon it for the sake of doing good. Are such persons absorbed in the service of God? Certainly not! Will they sacrifice their lives for the kingdom of God? Why you cannot make them even give up a quid of tobacco! A weed that is injurious to health and loathsome to society; they cannot give it up, were it to save a soul from death!

Who does not see that selfishness predominates in such persons? It shows the astonishing strength of selfishness. You often see the strength of selfishness showing itself in some such little thing more than in things that are greater. The real state of a man's mind stands out—that self-gratification is the law of his life—so strongly, that it

will not give place, even in a trifle, to those great interests, for which he ought to be willing to lay down his life.

**11. Those persons who are most readily moved to action by appeals to their own selfish interests show that they are serving their own gods.**

You see what motive influences such a man. Suppose I wish to get him to donate for building a chapel, what must I urge? Why, I must show how it will improve the value of his property, or advance his party, or gratify his selfishness in some other way. If he is more excited by these motives,

than he is by a desire to save perishing souls and advance the kingdom of Christ, you see that he has never given himself up to serve the Lord. He is still serving himself. He is more influenced by his selfish interests than by all those benevolent principles on which all religion turns. The character of a true servant of God is right opposite to this.

Take the case of two servants, one devoted to his master's interests, and the other having no conscience or concern but to secure his wages. Go to one, and he throws into the shade all personal considerations, and enlists

with heart and soul in achieving the object. The other will not act unless you present some selfish motive; unless you say, "Do so, and I will raise your wages or set you up in business," or the like. Is there not a radical difference between these two servants? Is not this an illustration of what actually takes place in our churches? Propose a plan of doing good that will cost nothing, and they will all go for it. But propose a plan which is going to affect their personal interest, to cost money, or take up time in a busy season, and you will see they begin to divide. Some hesitate; some doubt; some raise objections; and some resolutely refuse. Some enlist at once, because they see it will do great good. Others stand back till you devise some means to excite their selfishness in its favor. What causes the difference? Some of them are serving their own gods!



**They get excited talking about natural things!**

**12. Those are of this character who are more interested in other subjects than in religion.**

If you find them more ready to talk on other subjects; more easily excited by them, more awake to learn the news, they are serving their own gods. What multitudes are more excited by the bank question, or the question about war, or about the fire, or anything of a worldly nature, than about revivals, missions, or anything connected with the interests of religion. You find them all engaged about politics or speculation; but if you bring up the subject of religion, ah, they are afraid of excitement! And then they get excited talking about natural things ... it shows that religion is not the subject that is nearest their hearts. A man is always most easily excited on that subject that lies nearest his heart. Bring that up, and he is interested. When you can talk early and late about the news and other worldly topics, and when you cannot possibly be interested in the subject of religion, you know that your heart is not in it; and if you pretend to be a servant of God, you are a hypocrite.

**13. When persons are more jealous for their own fame than for God's glory, it shows that they live for themselves, and serve their own gods.**

You see a man more vexed or grieved by what is said against him than against God; whom does he serve—who is his God, himself or Jehovah? There is a minister thrown into a fever because somebody has said a word derogatory to his scholarship, or his dignity, or his infallibility, while he is as cool as ice at all the indignities thrown upon the blessed God. Is that man a disciple like Paul, willing to be considered a fool for the cause of Christ? Did that man ever take the first lesson in religion? If he had, he would rejoice to have his name cast out as evil for the cause of religion. No, he is not serving God; he is serving his own gods.

**14. Those are serving their own gods, who do not make salvation of souls the great and leading object of their lives.<sup>5</sup>**

The end of all religious institutions, that which gives value to them all, is the salvation of sinners. The end for

<sup>5</sup> While we agree with Finney that salvation of souls is important, we would say that glorifying God should be our chief object in life.

which Christ lives, and for which he has left his church in the world, is the salvation of sinners. This is the business which God sets his servants about, and if any man be not doing this, as his business as the leading and main object of his life, he is not serving Jehovah, he is serving his own gods.

**15. Those who are doing but little for God, or who bring but little to pass for God, cannot properly be said to serve him.**

Suppose you ask a professed servant of God. "What are you doing for God? Are you bringing anything to pass? Are you instrumental in the conversion of any sinners? Are you making impressions in favor of religion, or helping forward the cause of Christ?"

He replies, "Why, I do not know; I sometimes think I do love God, but I do not know that I am doing anything in particular at present." Is that man serving God? Or is he serving his own gods? "I talk to sinners some times," he says, "but they do not seem to feel much." That is because *you* do not feel. If your heart is not in it, no wonder you cannot make sinners feel. On the other hand, if you do your duty with your heart in the work, sinners cannot help feeling.

**16. Those who seek for happiness in religion, rather than for usefulness, are serving their own gods.**

Their religion is entirely selfish. They want to enjoy religion, and are all the while inquiring how they can get happy frames of mind, and how they can be pleasurable excited in religious exercises. And they will go only to such meetings, and sit only under such preaching, as will make them happy; never asking the question whether that is the way to do the most good or not. Now, suppose your servant should do so, and be constantly contriving how to enjoy himself, and if he thought he could be most happy in the parlor, stretched on the sofa, with a pillow of down under his head, and another servant to fan him, refusing to do the work which you set him about, and which your

But we let this point in the text, as seeking the lost is an important part of glorifying Christ. Later in the article he actually states that glorifying God is the supreme object, so we take it that he "mis-words" himself here a bit.



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interest urgently requires; instead of manifesting a desire to work for you, and a solicitude for your interest, and a willingness to lay himself out with all his powers in your service, he wants only to be happy! It is just so with those professed servants of Jehovah, who want to do nothing but sit on their handsome cushion, and have their minister feed them. Instead of seeking how to do good, they are only seeking to be happy. Their daily prayer is not, like that of the converted Saul of Tarsus, "Lord what wilt thou have me to do?" but, "Lord, tell me how I can be happy." Is that the spirit of Jesus Christ? No, he said, "I delight to do thy will, O God." Is that the spirit of the apostle Paul? No, he threw off his upper garments at once, and made his arms bare for the field of labor.

**17. Those who make their own salvation their supreme object in religion, are serving their own gods.**

There are multitudes in the church, who show by their conduct and even avow in their language, that their leading object is to secure their own salvation, and their grand determination is to get their own souls planted on the firm battlements of the heavenly Jerusalem, and walk the golden fields of Canaan above. If the Bible is not in error, all such characters will go to hell. Their religion is pure selfishness. And "he that will save his life shall lose it, and he that will lose his life for my sake, shall save it."<sup>6</sup>

**Remarks**

**1. See why so little is accomplished in the world for Jesus Christ.**

It is because there are so few that do anything for it. It is because Jesus Christ has so few real servants in the world. How many professors of Christianity do you suppose there are in this church, or in your whole acquaintance, that are really at work for God, and making a business of religion, and laying themselves out to advance the kingdom of Christ? The reason why religion advances no

<sup>6</sup> Finney spares not the rod in this paragraph, but consider his point deeply. It is the error of modern Christianity ...

faster is that there are so few to advance it, and so many to hinder it.

You see people at a fire, trying to get out the goods of a store. Some are determined to get out the goods, but the rest are not engaged about it, and they divert their attention by talking about other things, or positively hinder them by finding fault with their way of doing it, or by holding them back. So it is in the church. Those who are desirous of doing the work are greatly hindered by the backwardness, the complaints, and the positive resistance of the rest.

**2. See why so few Christians have the spirit of prayer. How can they have the spirit of prayer? Why should God give them the spirit of prayer?**

Suppose a man engaged in his worldly schemes, and that God should give that man the spirit of prayer. Of course he would pray for that which lies nearest his heart; that is, for success in his worldly schemes, to serve his own gods with. Will God give him the spirit of prayer for such purpose? Never! Let him go to his own gods for a spirit of prayer, but let him not expect Jehovah to bestow the

spirit of prayer, while he is serving his own gods.

**3. You see that there are a multitude of professors of religion that have not begun to be religious yet.**

Said a man to one of them, "Do you feel that your property and your business are all God's, and do you hold and manage them for God?"

"Oh, no," said he, "I have not gotten so far as that yet."

Not got so far as that! That man had been a professor of religion for years, and yet had not gotten so far as to consider his property, business, and all that he had as belonging to God! No doubt he was serving his own gods. For I insist upon it, that this is the very beginning of religion. What is conversion, but turning from the service of the world to the service of God? And yet this man had not found out that he was God's servant. And he seemed to think he was getting a great way in religion, to feel that all he had was the Lord's.



**What is conversion, but turning from the service of the world to the service of God?**

**4. It is great dishonesty for persons to profess to serve the Lord, and yet in reality serve themselves.**

You who are performing religious duties from selfish motives are in reality trying to make God your servant. If your own interest be the supreme object, all your religious services are only desires to induce God to promote your interests. Why do you pray, or keep the Sabbath, or give your property for religious objects? You answer, "For the sake of promoting my own salvation." Indeed! Not to glorify God, but to get to heaven! Do not you think the devil would do all that, if he thought he could gain his end by it and be a devil still? The highest style of selfishness must be to get God with all his attributes enlisted in the service of your mighty self.

And now, my hearers, where are you all? Are you serving Jehovah, or are you serving your own gods? Have you been living as servants of God? Is Satan's kingdom weakened by what you have done? Could you say now, "Come with me, and I will show you this and that sinner converted, or this and that backslider reclaimed, or this and that weak saint strengthened and aided?" Could you bring living witnesses of what you have done in the service of God? Or would your answer be, "I have been to meeting regularly on the Sabbath, and heard a great deal of good preaching, and I have generally attended the prayer meetings, and we had some precious meetings, and I have prayed in my family, and twice or thrice a day in my closet, and read the Bible." And in all that you have been merely passive, as to anything done for God. You have feared the Lord, and served your own gods.

"Yes, but I have sold so many goods, and made so much money, of which I intend to give a tenth to the missionary cause." Who hath required this at your hand, instead of saving souls? Going to send the gospel to the heathen, and letting sinners right under your own eyes go down to hell! Be not deceived. If you loved souls, if you were engaged to serve God, you would think of souls *here*, and do the work of God *here*. What should we think of a missionary going to the heathen, who had never said a word to sinners around him at home? Does he love souls? There is mockery in the idea of sending such a man to the heathen.

The man that will do nothing at home is not fit to go to the heathen. And he that pretends to be getting money for missions while he will not try to save sinners *here* is an outrageous hypocrite. ~

Note that the title is not Finney's, and the text has been edited slightly for readability. Taken from "Lectures to Professing Christians."