

What Saith the Scripture?

<http://www.WhatSaithTheScripture.com/>

# The Significance of Charles G. Finney's Disinterested Benevolence Or, God Loves All, But Only the Lovingly Obedient Go to Heaven

"Love is the fulfilling of the Law"  
(Romans 13:10).

by Tom Stewart  
5-31-2000

---

## Preface

The 19th century American evangelist, [Charles G. Finney](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Fellowship/Charles.G.Finney.html) -- <http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Fellowship/Charles.G.Finney.html> --, is well known for his "[Revival Lectures](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Revival.Lectures.html)" -- <http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Revival.Lectures.html> -- and "[Memoirs](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Finneys.Autobiography.html)" (also called, his "[Autobiography](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Finneys.Autobiography.html)" -- <http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Finneys.Autobiography.html> --); but, his contribution to Christian theology can best be seen in his careful analysis of Christian love, as expressed by his distinction between "disinterested benevolence" and the "love of complacency". "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal" (1Corinthians 13:1). In his sermons published in "[The Oberlin Evangelist](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Fellowship/Finney.Oberlin.Evangelist.html)" -- <http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Fellowship/Finney.Oberlin.Evangelist.html> --, Finney attempted to continue to edify those who had been won in the revivals of the previous years (prior to 1839). A lecture on "[The Law of God](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html)" -- [http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin\\_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html) -- by Brother Finney demonstrated that the Moral Law, which the LORD Jesus Christ outlined to the Pharisees, "comprises the whole of true religion". "36 Master, which is the Great Commandment in the Law? 37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the First and Great Commandment. 39 And the Second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 40 On these Two Commandments hang all the Law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:36-40).

Confusion over the meaning of the word "love" has caused the Body of Christ unnecessary pain and stumbling. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). In the early 1800's, Finney labored to lay a foundation for young Christians to "keep [themselves] in the love of God" (Jude 21). Because Christianity must necessarily stress the "love of God", a lack of precision in defining that love, may translate into stumbling the Christian into gross sin, i.e., "*God loves me even when I am sinning.*" But, "4 He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His Commandments, is a liar, and the Truth is not in him. 5 But whoso keepeth His Word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in Him" (1John 2:4-5). The following is a brief discussion of two terms used by Charles G. Finney, "disinterested benevolence" and the "love of complacency", and attempts to demonstrate that a proper understanding of the two, may be used by the Holy Spirit to keep the Body of Christ pure. "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame" (Revelation 16:15).

## Disinterested Benevolence

The word "disinterested" carries with it two different connotations. The more current implication of the word "disinterested" is a **negative** one-- meaning *not interested or indifferent*. On the other hand, Charles Finney used the word "disinterested" in a **positive**, 19th century way-- meaning *free of bias or self-interest*. "[Love] seeketh not her own" (1Corinthians 13:5). A charitable, kind, or generous act is generally defined by a modern dictionary as "benevolence"; and, Finney would stress that "benevolence" involves **good willing** *because it is a moral action of the human will*. Coupling "disinterested" with "benevolence", we get the uniquely 19th century expression-- commonly used by Finney and others of his day-- "disinterested benevolence". "For God so loved the world, that He gave His Only Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have Everlasting Life" (John 3:16). The love of John 3:16 is the quintessence of "disinterested benevolence".

"The very idea of disinterested benevolence, and there is no other true benevolence, implies the abandonment of the spirit of self-seeking, or of selfishness. It is impossible to become benevolent, without ceasing to be selfish" (from ["Attributes of Love" \[Lecture 22\] of Finney's "Systematic Theology"](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.3.html#LECTURE%2022) -- [http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.3.html#LECTURE 22 --](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.3.html#LECTURE%2022)).

"By **disinterested benevolence** I do not mean, that a person who is **disinterested** feels no interest in his object of pursuit, but that he seeks the happiness of others for its own sake, and not for the sake of its reaction on himself, in promoting his own happiness. He chooses to do good because he rejoices in the happiness of others, and desires their happiness for its own sake. God is purely and **disinterestedly benevolent**. He does not make His creatures happy for the sake of thereby promoting His own happiness, but because He loves their happiness and chooses it for its own sake. Not that He does not feel happy in promoting the happiness of His creatures, but that He does not do it for the sake of His own gratification" (from [Lecture 1 of Charles G. Finney's "Lectures to Professing Christians"](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Lectures.Profes.Christia.1.html#LECTURE%20I) -- [http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Lectures.Profes.Christia.1.html#LECTURE I --](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Lectures.Profes.Christia.1.html#LECTURE%20I)).

"Another peculiarity of this love, which must, by no means, be overlooked, is, that it must be **disinterested**; i.e. that we should not love him [God] for selfish reasons. But that we should love him for what he is--with **benevolence**, because his well-being is an infinite good--with complacency; because his character is infinitely excellent--with the heart; because all virtue belongs to the heart. It is plain, that nothing short of **disinterested love** is virtue. The Savior recognizes and settles this truth, in Luke 6:32-34: 'For if ye love them who love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same. And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again.' These words epitomize the whole doctrine of the Bible on this subject, and lay down the broad principle, that to love God, or anyone else, for selfish reasons, is not virtue... By **disinterested** I do not mean that the mind must necessarily feel that it has no personal interest in the thing. But that the degree of self-interest that is felt should not be disproportioned to the interest which the mind takes in the matter, on account of its own intrinsic importance. In other words, if the mind's interest in it is selfish, the action or exercise, whatever it may be, is sinful. If it be not selfish, it is holy, although there may be a suitable regard to our own interest, at the moment of decision" (from Finney's lecture, ["The Law of God, No. 1"](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html) -- [http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin\\_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html --](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html)).

Then, **disinterested benevolence** may best be described as the *unselfish seeking of the highest good or well-being of God and others for its own sake, because the selfless promoting of both God and man's well-being is in itself the highest good possible*-- which is again, **disinterested benevolence**.

"Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth" (1Corinthians 10:24). The loftiness of **disinterested benevolence** is epitomized by the self-sacrifice of the LORD Jesus Christ for the world of humanity. "But we see Jesus, Who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man" (Hebrews 2:9). Likewise, every Christian's attempt to lay himself out for the salvation of his neighbour, is also a depiction of **disinterested benevolence**. "Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved" (1Corinthians 10:33). Whether the Saints are seeking the salvation or sanctification of their fellow man, it is treating every man as his neighbour, i.e., with **disinterested benevolence**. "1 We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification" (Romans 15:1-2).

It becomes more plain to the modern reader of the Gospels that Jesus Christ's response to the Pharisees concerning the "Great Commandment in the Law" (Matthew 22:36) was a reiteration of the Moral Law, that has been plain to all of mankind since Adam, and not simply demanded of the Old Testament Jew. "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). And, that Moral Law expresses the necessity of love that Charles G. Finney labored to make plain to his 19th century audience with the term, "disinterested benevolence". "3 Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. 4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. 5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:3-5).

Not only is the love expressed by the term, **disinterested benevolence**, universally owed to God and man, but it *is owed without regard to the goodness or badness of their moral character*, i.e., "God so loved the world" (John 3:16), *not* merely the Elect. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1Timothy 1:15). "And so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12). Though it is certain that unless individual sinners repent of their sins, they "shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3), still, God loved the world enough to spare "not His own Son" (Romans 8:32) from the suffering of the Cross. Equally assured, is that no man will see God in Heaven without the clothing of holiness that God gives when men exercise truly **disinterested benevolence**-- but again, "when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the LORD" (Hebrews 12:14). Nevertheless, God has given to man the supreme display of **disinterested benevolence** when He gave His Only Begotten Son to atone for the sins of the world, sacrificing His Son for *ALL*, without regard to the obvious lack of goodness of man's moral character. "But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

### **Love of Complacency**

One more word that may disorient modern readers of Charles G. Finney, is "complacency", because

**complacency** is currently defined as *contentment or self-satisfaction*. But, a 19th century Finney would recoil at the thought of a Professed Christian seeking merely to satisfy himself, and would use the term "complacency" to mean the *approbation or approval* of "moral worth or excellence" (from "[Attributes of Love](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.3.html#LECTURE%2018)" [Lecture 18] of Finney's "[Systematic Theology](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html)" -- [http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.3.html#LECTURE 18](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.3.html#LECTURE%2018) --). "9 And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation... 12 Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing" (Revelation 5:9, 12).

"Another modification of this love, is that of complacency or esteem. God's character is infinitely good. We are therefore bound, not merely to love him, with the love of benevolence; but to exercise the highest degree of complacency in his character. To say that God is good and lovely is merely to say that he deserves to be loved. If he deserves to be loved, on account of his goodness and love, then he deserves to be loved in proportion to his goodness and loveliness. Our obligation, therefore, is infinitely great to exercise towards him the highest degree of the **love of complacency**, of which we are capable" (from Finney's lecture, "[The Law of God, No. 1](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html)" -- [http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin\\_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html) -- in "The Oberlin Evangelist" [February 27, 1839]).

"Complacency, as a state of will or heart, is only benevolence modified by the consideration or relation of right character in the object of it. God, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints, in all ages, are as virtuous in their self-denying and untiring labours to save the wicked, as they are in their **complacent love** to the saints" (from "[Foundation of Moral Obligation](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.1.html#LECTURE%207)" [Lecture 7] of Finney's "[Systematic Theology](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.1.html#LECTURE%207)" -- [http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.1.html#LECTURE 7](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.1.html#LECTURE%207) --).

Also, **complacency** is the "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy" (from [Lecture 12 of Charles G. Finney's "Lectures to Professing Christians"](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Lectures.Profes.Christia.4.html#LECTUREXII) -- <http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Lectures.Profes.Christia.4.html#LECTUREXII> --). Our Saviour categorically gave us the definitive statement on the meaning of the **love of complacency** in the private instructions He made to His disciples on the night of His betrayal. "If ye love Me, keep My Commandments" (John 14:15). Though all men are favored with disinterested benevolence from the Almighty, only the lovingly obedient are blessed by God's special **love of complacency**. "He that hath My Commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me: and he that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him" (14:21).

Again, Finney drives home the distinction between disinterested benevolence and the **love of complacency**:

"Complacency towards those that are virtuous is another modification of holy love. I say towards those that are virtuous, because while we exercise benevolence towards all, irrespective of their character, we have a right to exercise complacency towards those only who are holy. To exercise complacency towards the wicked is to be as wicked as they are. But to exercise entire complacency to those that are holy, is to be ourselves

holy" (from Finney's lecture, ["The Law of God, No. 1" in "The Oberlin Evangelist" \[February 27, 1839\]](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html) -- [http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin\\_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1839/OE1839.Law.of.God.1.html) --).

"Let not thine heart envy sinners: but be thou in the fear of the LORD all the day long" (Proverbs 23:17). The Psalmist confessed that he wrongly showed approval or **complacency** for the ungodly, being "envious at the foolish, when [he] saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalm 73:3). Though the Psalmist initially wrongly reasoned, he eventually realized his error, when he exclaimed, "Surely Thou didst set [the wicked] in slippery places: Thou castedst them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors" (73:18-19).

Unlike the disinterested benevolence that God demonstrated to a world of lost sinners through the "once for all" (Hebrews 10:10) atonement of Jesus Christ on the Cross, the **love of complacency** is exercised by God to only the one "that hath [His] Commandments, and keepeth them", for only that lovingly obedient one is the one "that loveth [Christ]: and he that loveth [Christ] shall be loved of [Christ's] Father, and [Christ] will love him, and will manifest [Himself] to him" (John 14:21). Not only does God distinguish between these two kinds of love, i.e., disinterested benevolence and the **love of complacency**, but it is a potentially fatal mistake for the Professed Christian to assume that the vastness of the **complacent** love of God is given to those who claim to know Him, while they refuse to walk holy. "1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? 2 God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Romans 6:1-2).

In fact, the very holiness of life that characterizes the True Saints, is the evidence that we are exercising the **love of complacency** to the Thrice Holy God. "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy: for I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 20:7). When Jesus said, "If ye love Me, keep My Commandments" (John 14:15), how can we rightfully claim to be exercising the **love of complacency** toward Him, without obeying the command to walk in holiness? "15 But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; 16 Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1Peter 1:15-16). The Apostle Paul understood the difficulties of living holy while still in the flesh; and yet, he affirmed by Inspiration that we are able to yield ourselves unto holiness. "19 I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness... 22 But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end Everlasting Life" (Romans 6:19, 22).

It is to the glory and credit of God that He has taken man as a moral agent-- who can, but won't obey-- and blessed him with the gift of the Holy Spirit of the New Testament "to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). "And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My Statutes, and ye shall keep My Judgments, and do them" (Ezekiel 36:27). So then, the **love of complacency** is exercised by God toward those who walk in loving, holy obedience, as Jesus revealed shortly before His betrayal, i.e., John 14:21. But, since a loving, holy walk is plainly possible through every Saint's possession of the Indwelling Holy Spirit, then we ought not to object that the **love of complacency** toward God, which is holiness, is required for all who would enter Heaven. "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the LORD" (Hebrews 12:14). [See Charles G. Finney's ["Salvation Always Conditional" \(Lecture 24\) from "The Oberlin Evangelist" of December 16, 1840](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1840/OE1840.Salvation.Condition.html) --

[http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin\\_1840/OE1840.Salvation.Condition.html](http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Oberlin_1840/OE1840.Salvation.Condition.html) --, where he states that "believers are not unconditionally and permanently justified by any one act of faith, is plainly asserted, in Ezek. 18:21-29, and 33:12-16."]

## Conclusion

It is the grand truth in the study of God, that "God is love" (1John 4:8). And, anyone who professes to know God, while walking disobediently, exhibits neither **disinterested benevolence** nor the **love of complacency** toward God or man. "For this is the love of God, that we keep His Commandments: and His Commandments are not grievous" (5:3). The essential or fundamental difference between **disinterested benevolence** and the **love of complacency**, is that **disinterested benevolence** is owed to all without regard to character, i.e., "For God so loved the world, that He gave His Only Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have Everlasting Life" (John 3:16), while the **love of complacency** is due only those who are holy or lovingly obedient, i.e., "He that hath My Commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me: and he that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him" (14:21).

The danger of confusing these terms that Charles G. Finney labored his life to teach the Philadelphian Church of the 1800's, is that:

(1) The Ungodly will claim that, if the God who is love died for the world, then all men will be universally saved, e.g., Universalism. But, that would be to neglect the paramount truth that only those who "believe on the LORD Jesus Christ" shall "be saved" (Acts 16:31), because that only is the "faith which worketh by love" (Galatians 5:6).

(2) The Backslidden will maintain that obedience to the Moral Law is not only unnecessary for salvation, and that, outright disobedience to the same Moral Law does not separate us from the love of God. "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). It would be the same as if they advocated that it is unnecessary to love God with all your heart-- as demanded by the Moral Law (Matthew 22:36-40)-- in order to be saved, i.e., "But if any man love God, the same is known of Him" (1Corinthians 8:3). Further, they would be purposely obscuring the fact that "whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not" (1John 3:6), and that "if we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the Truth" (1:6). And,

(3) The Honest But Ignorant Saints will become so confused by an improper understanding of the love of God, that they will often find themselves falling back into sin, making little headway in their Christian walk, while finding their pace to be much like the Laodicean Church around them. "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the Oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat" (Hebrews 5:12).

Finally, the great opportunity of properly understanding the love of God, which Charles Grandison Finney faithfully expounded to the Church with the terms "disinterested benevolence" and the "love of complacency", is that individual Christians may enter into the covenant blessings of the New Testament by knowledgeably embracing the Spirit of God, Who will work "in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles

through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the Promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:14). Instead of waiting for the Hereafter to see the Promises of God fulfilled, we can and ought to embrace them now. "As for Me, this is My Covenant with them, saith the LORD; My Spirit that is upon thee, and My Words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever" (Isaiah 59:21). We ought to resist the impulse of misdirected teachings that make the giving of the Holy Spirit only a past event to an Institutional Church, but that the very purpose of the gift of the Holy Spirit, is that the God of love will "abide with [us] for ever" (John 14:16). More important than the happiness that we immediately receive from the Spirit's presence, or even the anticipation of future Rapture and Heavenly joyfulness, we will have the present fulfillment of the Entire Sanctification or Complete Obedience promised through Jeremiah. "But this shall be the Covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put My Law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jeremiah 31:33). And, we, the Church of Jesus Christ, will presently justify the God Who created us "in His own image" (Genesis 1:27) as moral agents, and the Saviour Who redeemed us "by His own blood" (Hebrews 9:12), that we should actually and presently "live unto righteousness" (1Peter 2:24). "That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15).

May the "very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our LORD Jesus Christ" (1Thessalonians 5:23).

Maranatha!