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God's Wrath Against Those Who Withstand His Truth

by Charles Grandison Finney
President of Oberlin College

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Lecture XII

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Text.--Rom. 1:18: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness, and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness."

Every word of this impressive passage demands attentive consideration. It would seem that there is no end to its pointed and pungent applications to the practical life of men.

I. What is meant here by "holding the truth"?

II. What is it to "hold the truth in unrighteousness"?

III. What shall we understand in our text by "the wrath of God"?

IV. How is this wrath of God against such unrighteousness revealed?

V. What is meant by "ungodliness"?

VI. Why is this terrible language used against this sin?

VII. Not only does this sinner care not for God; he cares nothing for the universal good.

I. Let us enquire what is meant here by "holding the truth"?

- 1. This language is sometimes used to signify holding fast to an opinion -- having certain views as one's own. But in this text, both the original word and the context concur to give another sense. To make it clear, I must first observe that truth is the natural stimulus to action. Its natural influence is to lead men to act. It will always have this tendency unless restrained.

- 2. Now the word which Paul used here means precisely to restrain -- to hold back the truth, from exerting its appropriate influence. Paul assumes that the men of whom he speaks refuse to comply with the truth -- this being the way in which men hold back the truth

II. What is it to "hold the truth in unrighteousness"?

The meaning of this is often not well understood, and therefore should be carefully considered.

- 1. The original word for unrighteousness implies deficiency -- a want of righteousness. To hold the truth in unrighteousness, implies that you see your duty, but fail to do it. You restrain the truth so that it does not lead you on to do righteousness. To illustrate this point, suppose that some of you men of business have claims against one of your neighbors. You have sold him goods on time; the day of payment has come, you need your pay; he knows he ought to meet his promises promptly. You call on him; he acknowledges his obligation -- says he knows he ought to pay you, but yet he fails to do it. In truth he wants to speculate on his money. He can put it out at fifty per cent, and this, he thinks, is much better for him than paying his honest debts. What should you think if when you call on him, and ask him if he ought not to pay, he should laugh you in the face? Indeed, says he, "do you suppose I care what I ought to do?" He scoffs at the idea of moral obligation. Could you find words strong enough to paint his vileness? Yet the whole of it is -- lack of righteousness -- the want of moral integrity and unrighteousness. It is precisely what sinners do towards God when they say I know I ought to love and serve Thee, but what do I care for that? What is that to me? I have my own ends to answer, and I can enjoy myself better in my own way than in God's.
- 2. This is not too strong language. It does not at all exaggerate the infinite vileness of sinners who practically say -- I know God requires it and I know it is right; but what of that?

III. What shall we understand in our text by "the wrath of God"?

Not any selfish anger, for God has none, and never can have; but a benevolent displeasure, such as a holy and good being must feel towards a wrong so monstrous. Would not you be greatly displeased with such conduct towards yourself? If a man honestly owed you, and yet was reckless of his obligation, would not you think his conduct an outrage, and would you not be greatly displeased? And would you not feel deeply that you have reason for the displeasure you feel? Certainly, and by how much the more holy you are, by so much the more deeply and surely will you be displeased.

IV. How is this wrath of God against such unrighteousness revealed?

- 1. I answer, partly, in the irresistible convictions of our own minds. We cannot but believe that God is displeased with us for holding back the truth through our unrighteousness. We know this as a first truth, and cannot but know it. It is thus revealed to us in the strongest possible manner. Our necessary conceptions of God are such that it is impossible for us to deny that God is and must be displeased with this sin.
- 2. Moreover, the Bible reveals this often, nay I might say -- everywhere.

- 3. Again, God's providence reveals it. We know that we deserve to be damned and sent to hell forthwith, yet we are not, but God lets us live yet longer. It is plain that God arranged many things in His providence for the purpose of reforming us. Hence it is apparent, even from the revelations God makes of His providence, that He is disposed to forgive. Some have said we never could infer God's mercy on grounds of natural theology -- i.e.. from His external providences and apart from a written revelation. Yet who does not know that all mankind have an idea of hope -- and of themselves as "prisoners of hope" -- the question of their doom being not already settled as it would be if they were now in hell.
- 4. The Bible has settled this question. The original condition of being saved, perfect obedience, has given place to another system in which, men having sinned, pardon is offered; a system which while it shows that God does indeed hate sin, yet shows also that He has mercy in His heart, and longs to exercise it towards the guilty sinner. Hence all along through the past history of our world, God has come forth ever and anon to reveal His indignation against sin, as in the deluge on the old world; on Sodom, on Egypt and on rebellious Israel. Mark how, all down the history of human sinning, God has come forth in flashes of glory and of power, terrible to human hearts! In every way practicable to a system of probation and of mercy, God has revealed His wrath against sin.
- 5. God reveals His wrath also in that prophetic remorse which agonized the soul of the sinner and forewarns him of the coming wrath of his God. Sinners are afraid to die? Why are they afraid to die rather than live? Because they know themselves to be sinners, and therefore dread to meet an offended God. This dread is prophetic.
- 6. God's wrath is revealed moreover in the judicial blindness to which God gives up sinners when they have abused His truth too long; in the gloomy death-bed; in the dark despair under which they die. Alas for him! everywhere along his dark way to hell God flashes terror and wrath! Behind all these displays of love and mercy, you may hear the mutterings of offended justice. The flashes of His sword gleam out, revealing His wrath against all unrighteousness.

V. Our text says -- "God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness." What is meant by "ungodliness"?

- 1. The absence of piety towards God. The original word is compounded of two, one of which gives us the idea of worship, reverence for God, and the other indicates the utter absence and want of this. The entire word therefore means no worship -- no regard for God -- no recognition of His goodness or greatness. God comes before the sinner, a glorious object of love and worship, but the sinner refuses to regard Him. Ah indeed, he has no family altar, no closet! Mark this terrible text! God reveals His wrath against all this withholding of love and worship, praise and adoration. See our men of morality who never worship God, never love Him -- never acknowledge Him in any of their ways! Mark, do you hear what God says? Ah, back of all this sweet flowing of mercy, you may hear the mutterings of Jehovah's thunder, His wrath against all ungodliness and unrighteousness!
- 2. If you do not worship, love and obey, you are an ungodly sinner, and against you is this awful wrath revealed!

- 3. Unrighteousness seems to refer to neglect of duty towards men -- refusing to pay one's honest debts -- refusing to meet any honorable obligations. Any neglect of duty to men is unrighteousness. The word means short-comings. Perhaps no other term translates it so perfectly. It embraces all falling short of duty. This is always voluntary and blameworthy; just as you always regard it when you charge the man who owes you with short coming and wrong if he can pay but will not. This guilt is at the door of all who admit that they ought to love God and serve Him, but will not. All ye who withhold from God or man what is due from you -- all ye who allow yourselves to live below your own standard -- on you this wrath must fall. If you allow yourself to live thus in voluntary neglect of your duty, against you is God's wrath revealed. If you find fault with others for neglect of duty, you show in this that you know your own duty and are therefore in the greater sin. It is very common for sinners to do this towards Christians -- to tattle on professors of religion as hypocrites and sinners. So are you, and all the more so because of the clearness with which you can discern the short-comings of others. All ye who hold one thing in theory and another in practice -- who know the right yet choose to do the wrong -- what else can be said of you save that you hold back the truth in unrighteousness? Some professed Christians complain of their own coldness and make many confessions, yet fail just as much again in their duties. They are like the man who talks well about paying his honest debts -- who never fails to admit his obligations, but always fails to pay. He can but will not! If this bore upon you, you would surely cry out -- What a villain you are! Yet this case scarcely begins to portray the horrible guilt of the sinner against God! Who of you are in this moral attitude towards your Maker? Will you pause and ask -- Who?

VI. Let us also ask -- Why is this terrible language used against this sin?

- 1. Because this holding back the truth implies the knowledge of it. Men could not hold it back if they did not know it.
- 2. Because it implies also the ability of obeying it: else men could not be denounced for holding it back and for refusing to obey it. How differently do the scriptures speak on this point from any theologians! The latter are wont to say -- that no mere man can obey God's law. Paul says no such thing. Speaking with special reference to those who had not even a written law, he assumes that they knew enough of God to obey and had ample power to obey. Men, hearing the truth concerning their duty, are not passive -- they cannot be. By their very nature they must have this power to feel its force, and feeling it, to yield, or to resist. The text implies a positive effort to resist the truth -- to rule down its demands. To take deliberately the opposite course to that required is no accidental thing. It is a direct refusal to fulfill our acknowledged obligations to God. This amounts virtually to the denial of all moral obligation and accountability. It is a direct rejection of God's authority. The sinner decides that great question whether God's will shall be law to him by answering -- No. Neither God, His law, nor the sinner's own sense of duty shall be his rule. For the sinner to disregard the known claims of God's revealed truth is nothing less than to decide fairly, openly, to the very face of God, that he will not obey Him. God's known will, he says, is not a reason that shall influence me.
- 3. Be it remembered, holding the truth in unrighteousness implies that there is no inability to obey it. For if there were such inability, God's wrath could not go forth against the sinner. How

very different is this from that theology which represents God's commands as so hard that men, very well disposed to do the best they can, yet cannot obey them!

- 4. A good reason for such strong language is -- this conduct is total dishonesty -- a determination to perform no duty to God. It is a full rejection of His claims. It virtually says to God -- I don't care for Thee, say what Thou wilt -- what do I care? I know Thy commandments are right, but I shall withhold my heart; I will not acknowledge God! Certainly this is the very essence of all iniquity -- the sum of all villainy. What would you think if anybody should serve you so? You would feel that you were greatly wronged -- that those who treated you so had not the least particle of moral honesty! If a man should treat you in just this way, and then set up the claim of being fair minded and honorable, what would you say? You would say that so far from being right-minded, he looks with perfect contempt on the idea of moral obligation! It shall not bind him!

To be sure, that dishonest man may pay his debts at the bank, lest else it might ruin his credit, and forbid his getting more money; but suppose you could not reach him with the sense of moral obligation; then would you not say -- he is the perfection of a villain!

- 5. This language is not too strong. There is no crime he would not commit if it were convenient and he thought it for his selfish interest. Who could trust him? There is no crime on earth or in hell that he would refrain from committing on the score of moral obligation. Why? Because moral obligation does not touch him; he has discarded its claims.

Now what do you say? Is it wonderful that God should speak thus against this sin of all sins? Against him who says -- I do not care for God! Let Him say what He will and do what He will, I care not for my obligations to obey Him!

VII. There is still another point of view from which to contemplate this sin. Not only does this sinner care not for God; he cares nothing for the universal good.

- 1. God has bidden him care for the good of mankind, love his neighbor as himself; and has placed before the sinner His own example, thus seeking to lead him on in real benevolence. But this sinner will do no such thing. Whereas God's whole law as to fellow beings is condensed into this one precept -- "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," the sinner applies to God the same doctrine which Chief Justice Taney applies to black men in their relation to white. Taney said -- "Black men have no rights which white men are bound to respect." The sinner says, God has no rights that I am bound to respect. And if He asks me to respect my fellow-men's rights, I will not do it for His sake!
- 2. This is total depravity. A man repudiating all moral obligation -- going, as to God, into universal repudiation -- a known, willful, persistent repudiation of all moral obligation and nothing less!
- 3. And this is by no means a caricature. God tries to get your sympathy and to draw you into fellowship with Himself in loving His great family; but you say, No! Let me have no fellowship with God, or with the good among His creatures!

Now ought not God to be displeased with you? Could you respect Him if He were not? Surely, you would say, He is not fit to govern the universe! Nay, He is worse than the sinner since He knows infinitely more.

Now I put this to your conscience, could you exonerate God from great blame if He were to be indifferent to such a sin as this of disowning moral obligation?

Remember, I am not speaking now of open vice, in itself intrinsically hateful and disgusting; but of declining to obey -- of falling short of duty. What would you think of your children if they were to do just that thing towards you -- uniformly fail and refuse to obey your commands, or respect their obligations to you?

Since God feels thus, it behoves Him to express it; why not? What less than this could He reasonably do? Of the wicked God says -- "Whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not." You may hear it rolling like distant thunder. O how terrible when it shall break forth in one eternal storm!

Long time Mercy has been holding back the uplifted arm of Justice, while God's heart has been heaving with holy indignation -- so long that you are even thinking He will never arise to vengeance. "Thou thoughtest I was altogether such an one as thyself, but I will reprove thee and set them in order before thine eyes."

REMARKS.

1. This sin is the very essence of all wickedness, because it is the mind resisting the truth and refusing obedience to it when most pressed to obey. It involves therefore the utmost dishonesty. It is withholding your good will from the universe.

Sinner, did you ever think of this, when you refuse to work for God and to feel with Him for the good of the universe -- what if my refusal should really frustrate His benevolent plans? What then? Would not that be an infinite mischief, an untold calamity? But if you refuse to work with Him -- if you set yourself against His plans, no thanks to you that your course does not frustrate all God's benevolence towards the universe! So far as you can do it, it is done, and you have the responsibility of doing all you can to make the universe infinitely wretched, both God and all His creatures.

You think it would be very hard in God to shut you out of heaven -- to say to you as to the rich man, "Son, remember that thou in thy life time receivedst thy good things -- and there are no more for thee!" But why should not He do this? You do not love God's happiness, nor that of your fellow men. You flatly disown all your obligations to do either. You refuse to seek your neighbor's good; no thanks to you if he does not lie down in everlasting sorrow.

Of course in holding back the truth, you set the worst example possible, for more men lose their souls by neglect than by open vice. To set them this example therefore is to tempt them in their weakest, most susceptible point.

2. The more enlightened men are, the greater is their guilt. Sometimes I have had such views of the

sins of many here in this matter, that I cannot think of preaching anything else. Some say -- No place like Oberlin -- such Sabbaths, such religious privileges! Yet for all this, it may be the wickedest place on earth, just because it is so highly favored of God with gospel light.

The Jews thought there was nothing like their beloved city -- "beautiful for its situation, the joy of the whole earth;" but yet how terribly did God pour out the vials of His wrath even on that once holy city! He punished them as He rarely ever punished any other nation. Men often bless themselves for their morality and for their gospel privileges; yet who can measure the guilt of those that know their duty so well, yet will not do it! They are like those who will not pay their debts, yet boast of being very moral and very civil. Hear them boast -- We do nothing very bad; to be sure we never mean to pay out debts, but we are not openly vicious. What would you say of such hypocrites? More than once, when I have attended meetings and have heard Christians confess their backslidings, I have asked -- Do you mean to defend that? Do you intend to go on living so? It is awful to hear men say -- "We know our duty, but we do not do it." Especially so, when they make great professions also, and insist that they hope in Christ. How shocking to hear one confess, as I once heard a man, "Lord, we have sinned against Thee all the day tomorrow; O Lord, forgive us!" What does this mean? Does he assume that he cannot help it? If this be true, why does God condemn men for holding the truth in unrighteousness? I know very well he would have said -- "O, I do as well as I can." If that is true, why does he confess that he is not doing as well as he can -- that is -- why does he confess his sin? Can God respect those who say they are sinning all the time when they do not believe it to be so?

On this point men stop their enquires just where they should not. Certainly they ought to pursue the enquiry till they ascertain what is not sin. For example your neighbor says -- "You owe me." You reply -- "Perhaps not; let us see." You go on and examine till you find how the case is. So you should. So men should do towards God. But suppose you find that you owe your neighbor, and then you stop there and refuse to pay. That is the most provoking place to stop -- the whole question of debt and consequently of duty, being settled, but nothing more done. This is the way many treat God -- the way they shamefully abuse Him!

O sinner; never more complain of your fellow men for not fulfilling their obligations to you while you deny yours to God! Say to yourself -- "It will be soon enough for me to complain of any creature in the universe when I have ceased to repudiate my obligations to God! How can I stand before this appalling fact! Certainly I know I ought to be treated as the universal enemy of God and all the good."

Indeed, if the sinner's eyes were open, he would see God's awful wrath kindling up ready to burst upon his guilty head.

Backslider, is it you? How old is your love? Ye who once plighted your faith and gave to God your right hand, where are you? Have you gone back to sin and shame? God calling after you and you fleeing -- what shall He say to you? Even now His voice rings in your ear -- "Return, O backsliding daughter, for I am married to you." And where are you? Gone after other lovers! Oh shame! What can be more dishonorable -- more shameful!

3. You can see why it is that many persons here seem to grow more and more hardened in sin. It is because they take no action under the pressure of truth upon their heart and conscience. Is it any

wonder that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all such sinners? Think now, will you do the very same thing again today? Again, will you practically say -- "I know my duty, but I will not do it." You recollect that Pollock represents the sinner wailing in hell, as hearing continually an echoing response to his agonizing groans -- "Ye knew your duty, but ye did it not." This, O sinner must be the answer forever to all your wailings of sorrow in the world or woe. Sometimes the image of some one, once a dear friend on earth, will come up before my mind as he drinks of the cup of everlasting woe, and I see him fleeing to escape, but the waves of damnation follow hard after him and he is overwhelmed before them! Alas that he did not yield his soul to the claims of truth when he might! I have not often preached on the subject of God's eternal wrath against sinners. Perhaps I have not preached about it as much as I ought to have done. O sinner, when that dreadful wrath shall have fully come, whither can you flee for succor and where can you hide?

While I was in New York many years ago I had a dream which made a strong impression on my mind. I never give heed at all to dreams, save as they serve to impress great truths; then they are of real use. In this dream, I heard awful thunders in one direction. Going to look out upon the face of the sky in that quarter, I was startled to find that the awful cloud had wholly overspread the sky and the thunders rolled from every quarter -- the whole heavens seeming to be a burning mass of flame. Turning my eye downward to the earth, I saw the public square and all the streets, far as the eye could reach, crowded full of men and women, on their knees, wailing in utter agony and terror. I rushed out and pressed my way among them to offer Christ to their agonized souls. Look here, said I, how can you know but you may find mercy in Jesus, even now! Possibly it may yet be in time! But to my amazement and grief, not one would hear me! Alas! Despair was upon them! Her iron grasp had seized upon their souls and there was no escape. Then I saw as I never had before, why sinners cannot and will not repent in the world of despair.

4. I sometimes hear persons sneer at the idea of "the wrath of the Lamb." May God help them see their madness! If the Lamb of God who dies for sinners becomes the Lion of His wrath, so much the more awful must His vengeance be! Sinner, will you still go on, resisting all the claims of God and holding back His truth so that it shall never save your soul? Having done this all your life thus far, will you do it yet again? How awful! Before God, I charge you today with the great crime of all crimes -- holding back the truth of God from its legitimate influence on your soul. Do you ask what truth? This: Salvation possible today -- offered freely to your dying soul. God calling for the free consecration of your heart, and you refusing. God saying, Come; and your soul responding, No! No salvation, no yielding of my heart to Jesus! When Jesus lifts up His melting voice, saying, "Come unto Me for life," you answer No; Thou shalt not have my heart; Thou shalt not have my soul." This is your ground. All the day long, this is your position. "I will not give God my heart. I will not have salvation at such a price." O how unutterably horrible!

GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

Compiled by Katie Stewart

1. **Complacency, or Esteem:** "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." *Systematic*

Theology (LECTURE VII). Also, "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE XII)*.

2. **Disinterested Benevolence:** "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." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE I)*.
3. **Divine Sovereignty:** "The sovereignty of God consists in the independence of his will, in consulting his own intelligence and discretion, in the selection of his end, and the means of accomplishing it. In other words, the sovereignty of God is nothing else than infinite benevolence directed by infinite knowledge." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXVI)*.
4. **Election:** "That all of Adam's race, who are or ever will be saved, were from eternity chosen by God to eternal salvation, through the sanctification of their hearts by faith in Christ. In other words, they are chosen to salvation by means of sanctification. Their salvation is the end- their sanctification is a means. Both the end and the means are elected, appointed, chosen; the means as really as the end, and for the sake of the end." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXIV)*.
5. **Entire Sanctification:** "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and, (2.) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LVIII)*.
6. **Moral Agency:** "Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation. The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
7. **Moral Depravity:** "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
8. **Human Reason:** "the intuitive faculty or function of the intellect... it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation to act in conformity with perceived moral relations." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.

9. **Retributive Justice:** "Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXIV)*.
10. **Total Depravity:** "Moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
11. **Unbelief:** "the soul's withholding confidence from truth and the God of truth. The heart's rejection of evidence, and refusal to be influenced by it. The will in the attitude of opposition to truth perceived, or evidence presented." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LV)*.