

What Saith the Scripture?

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The Way That Seems Right, But Ends In Death

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Lecture IV

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Text.--Prov. 16:25: "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."

The same words occur also in Proverbs 14:12, showing that the sacred writer felt deeply the force of this truth.

We must first enquire,

I. What is meant by seeming to be right.

II. What is the doctrine of the text?

III. This one way, what is it?

IV. Why do men think this way to be right?

V. But why do men thus deceive themselves?

VI. This sort of obedience is not the way to heaven.

VII. How should a man act if he may not do what seems to him right?

I. What is meant by seeming to be right.

The original word denotes what lawyers express by saying a thing is right "prima facie" -- on its face -- at first appearance -- as the case presents itself at first view and without looking at the other side. Unless objections appear, it is to be assumed as true. The word implies a want of certainty. It does not

preclude doubt or further investigation. Indeed if the matter be one of any importance, there ought to be further investigation, notwithstanding all this appearance of being right. The original word applies naturally to an opinion adopted loosely, on a merely surface view and without honest and thorough investigation. It also implies a credulous state of mind as to this way that seems right. The mind is very willing to satisfy itself with a mere seeming.

Such I take to be the meaning of the phrase "seemeth to be right."

II. What, then, is the doctrine of the text?

- 1. Plainly this -- that we may think we are right and are doing right, when in truth we are utterly wrong. It may seem that we are in the way to heaven, while we are really in the way to hell.
- 2. Hence it is of vital consequence to enquire and ascertain what this way is. It is remarkable that the text speaks of one way, there is a way that seemeth right to a man. It does not indeed expressly affirm that there is but one, yet it may be inferred that the writer's mind rested on one general way in regard to which men deceived themselves to their ruin.

III. Let us therefore enquire for this one way, what is it?

I answer, in general it is the way of obeying God's commands merely in the letter and overlooking the Spirit. In this way men overlook that in which alone real obedience to God consists, namely, the state of mind -- the real motive and spirit in which a deed is done. Men do what their conscience demands, outwardly, but not with the heart. They obey in the letter, but they disobey in the spirit. Their obedience is constrained, not loving and cheerful; and therefore, it is really no obedience at all. They yield to the demands of their conscience as to the letter of the precept; and there, with them, obedience ends. This seems to them to be obedience, and therefore they expect from it God's favor and heaven at last; but they deceive themselves; for the end of this way is only death.

But it will be well to enquire here --

IV. Why do men think this way to be right?

Because it is required, both by conscience and by the sacred scriptures. For example, honesty in business; prayer to God. These and similar duties, both conscience and the Bible require. Of course it seems right to do them. And it truly is right. Outwardly, it is the thing God demands. But they overlook the fact that God does and must demand something more than the outward. They forget that real obedience consists in the loving state of mind in which the externally right things are done. They forget that, while "man looketh on the outward appearance, God looketh on the heart."

V. But why do men thus deceive themselves?

- 1. Because they are in a dishonest, selfish state of mind. They are in a state like Paul's when he verily thought he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth; but the reason of his verily thinking so lay in the strong committal of his soul to Judaism and to his selfish interests in that system. Really he was not in an honest state of mind, and therefore was

not prepared to judge truly in such matters. In a dishonest state of mind, men are satisfied with cheap service done for God. They are by no means careful to give Him good measure. Perhaps they do not even think for a moment that, by the very necessity of His position as Moral Governor of the universe, He must demand the sincere homage of the heart. They think to turn Him off with miserably cheap service. They would not themselves be satisfied with such service from their own wives or children. A merely outside show of obedience and affection would not satisfy them. Yet strangely they assume that such outside obedience in their case will satisfy God! Being in a thoroughly selfish state of mind, they are blind to the spiritual demands of God's law. They have no just conceptions of the real nature of their own righteousness. They assume it to be a fair and perfect robe, but God accounts it only as filthy rags -- not rags only -- but filthy rags -- loathsome and foul -- intolerable.

- 2. Such persons are blind to the spirit of God's law. For example, the law which requires them to pay a debt to a neighbor. In a selfish spirit, one will pay such a debt because the civil law demands it, and he cannot avoid paying it. Or he may do it selfishly to sustain his reputation. But the truly benevolent man pays this debt out of love to his neighbor. He remembers the law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," and he considers nothing less than this, as real obedience to God. Because he loves his neighbor, therefore he pays to him what he owes him. This, and this only is obeying in the true spirit of obedience.
- 3. So selfish men go to the house of God to please themselves and not to please God. They have no heart in it. This seems to them to be right, but it seems so, only because they are selfish, and do not deeply consider the matter. They do not ask themselves -- Would I be pleased with such service from my wife or from my children? Would I be satisfied if my servants thought only of the outward appearance and had no proper respect for my feelings and wishes?

This kind of service is all wrong, however right it may seem. It does not answer the demands of the law of God. This law demands the homage of the heart, and can accept of nothing less. How then can it accept that which is wholly selfish?

VI. This sort of obedience is not the way to heaven.

- 1. It does not make the heart mellow, humble, holy; indeed it has no such influence at all, but rather the opposite. It only makes the heart vain, proud, hard and yet more selfish.
- 2. It should never be forgotten that any obedience which is not from the heart and from real love is no obedience at all.
- 3. People are prone to congratulate themselves on their selfish and external obedience, but such obedience is not performing their duty to God or to man either. It leaves the soul in sin and in bondage.
- 4. This delusion is wholly inexcusable.

VII. Some men, willing to justify themselves, will ask -- How should a man act if he may not do what seems to him right?

- 1. I answer, he may and must do what seems right to him; he must follow the dictates of his conscience; but he must see to it that his mind be honest and that his conscience be enlightened. For this, he is responsible. He can be honest; he can open his eyes to see God's claims in their true light.
- 2. Such selfish men obey their conscience only apparently, not really, for in its proper action, conscience requires a right heart. It demands all this and is satisfied with nothing less. Conscience requires that the mind be upright and the heart truly obedient. It cannot be satisfied with obedience that is merely in the letter and not in the Spirit. Hence it is plain that selfish men do not really obey conscience.
- 3. Again, their obedience is only servile. It is not done in the spirit of heaven and does not mold them into this spirit. It has no tendency to prepare them for the purity of heaven, and cannot, therefore, fit them to enter easily and naturally into the obedience and worship of that world of purity and love. God requires something more than a mere seeming to be right, and selfish men really know, deep in their heart, that such worship is only a seeming.

REMARKS.

1. This class of persons abstain from open vice. Such vice cannot seem to be right to anybody. With any amount of effort, they cannot make it seem right. Hence this way that seems right to a man must be one of strict outward morality and of correct external observance. If men do what seems to be their duty, they cannot stop short of this, for nothing less than this can ever seem to be their duty. A man has been to meeting; he has paid his honest debts; therefore, say they, all is right. All this looks right; nothing less than this could even look right. But those who neglect the outward cannot even suppose their course to be right. It cannot seem right to an honest mind. They trust they are right, they say. Ask them -- Are you walking with God? I trust so, they reply. Are you resting on Christ alone? I hope so. But you observe they speak only with much qualification, not with confidence. This is quite different from the manner of the sacred writers. They do not say -- We trust we are right; we hope we are God's people; but they say -- "We know in whom we have believed;" "We know that we have passed from death into life because we love the brethren." The men of whom the text speaks, say all that they dare say -- all they ought to say of themselves. It is only a faint sort of hope and trust that they have. They altogether lack the clear, strong, decided conviction which the inspired writers felt and expressed.

2. Again, they look only to the proximate intentions -- not to the ultimate; they think only of the outside. They went to public worship; yes they were there. That was all. They do not claim their hearts were there. Ask them, Is that obeying God? I hope so, say they -- but in their hearts their confidence that God can accept it must be very weak. Are the old heart and the new one, just the same? Is the new no better than the old?

3. Men will often deceive themselves even out of the Bible itself. The things said in the Bible of sinners and hypocrites they apply to Christians and so they find something which both meets their case and encourages their hopes that they are Bible Christians. How sad a thing is this!

4. These self-deceived men have no heart in their worship of God. Their souls are not all liquid, flowing out in praise, and full of love and of heaven. There is none of the spirit of heaven in their

hearts. Yet they think they mean to do right and to do their duty. It seems so to them. They are in the way that seemeth right. They read their Bibles; they go to the house of God; they do a great many things; but all goes no farther than right seeming. It is right only in the outward -- the letter. The inward is still all wrong. Jesus Christ is not formed in them, the hope of glory. How awful that men should be deceived by this mere seeming! Mark that man. He goes on with his doings, his hope perhaps still growing a little brighter. How awful to think that he must wake at length in hell! A woman who had lived long with a dull Christian hope, but seemed to herself to be nearly ripe for heaven, drew very near to the grave; she sunk away, and they thought she was really dead -- when suddenly she started up, shrieked once with an expression of unutterable horror, -- Is this hell? then fell back again and passed away! We cannot know what she saw! Yet who would wish to die so?

My dear hearers, the time is short ere we shall know our fitness or unfitness for the eternal world, past all uncertainty, or mistake. No longer here; the places that know us now shall know us no more then. If this day were to be your last, what would you do? Would you not say, I cannot be satisfied with a mere seeming -- I must absolutely know that all is right? What is your state today? Do you say -- I have examined my foundation; I have not been satisfied with merely seeming to be right? But even you, if this day were surely known to you to be your last, would say, (would you not?) I must be more certain. I must go over this whole ground again, for how can I rest while the least possibility of doubt remains! Let this work be honestly done, from first to last; lay your soul bare to the searching of God's word and Spirit; cry unto Him -- "Search me, O God, and try my thoughts; prove me and know my ways, and lead me in the way everlasting." Leave no room for mistake in a matter of such enduring moment. See to it that you, at least, be not of those who go in a way that seemeth right, but the end thereof are the ways of death.

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)*.