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Holding The Truth in Unrighteousness- No. 1

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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."

In speaking from these words I inquire,

I. What is ungodliness?

II. What is unrighteousness in the sense here used?

III. What is it to hold the truth in unrighteousness?

IV. What are we to understand by the wrath of God in this text?

V. Against whom is this wrath of God revealed from heaven?

VI. Why is the wrath of God thus revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men?

I. What is ungodliness?

The original word means, primarily, to neglect God. It is the omission of duty to God; the withholding from him of worship, love, confidence, obedience. It is the withholding from God that which is his due.

II. What is unrighteousness in the sense here used?

- 1. The original word properly means, neglect of duty to man, as ungodliness implies neglect of duty to God.

- 2. It is an omission of duty, a withholding from man his due.
- 3. Unrighteousness, as the term is evidently here used in distinction from ungodliness, means the withholding of that equal love to man which is his due--that regard for his interest, and feelings, and character, and whatever is to him a good.

Withholding this from man is unrighteousness, as withholding it from God is ungodliness. Unrighteousness, in the broader sense, consists in withholding either from God or man, whatever is their due from us.

- 4. But as the terms ungodliness and unrighteousness are here both used, we are undoubtedly to understand unrighteousness here as having reference particularly to the omission of duty to our fellow men. Every thing then, is unrighteousness, which is short of doing our whole duty to our fellow men; and every thing is ungodliness which is short of doing our whole duty to God.

III. I inquire in the third place, What is it to hold the truth in unrighteousness?

- 1. The word rendered hold in this case, means to restrain, to hold down, to hold back. To hold the truth in unrighteousness, is, for selfish reasons, to refuse to obey the truth.
- 2. When duty is once known or seen, indifference is impossible. Truth is the natural stimulus of the mind, and especially truth that reveals moral obligation.

When moral obligation is perceived, the mind cannot remain inactive. The perception of moral obligation forces the mind into a state of activity. The freedom of the Will does not imply, that in such circumstances the mind can remain inactive altogether.

But the freedom of the Will implies, that in every case of perceived moral obligation we have power to act one way or the other, to comply or refuse compliance with moral obligation.

When, therefore, moral obligation is perceived, passivity becomes impossible. The mind must act; it must either comply with the obligation; or it must refuse.

This should always be remembered--that indifference, or a state of non-activity, becomes impossible in the presence of perceived obligation. In such circumstances truth must be embraced or rejected; obligation must be accepted or rejected; duty must be performed or neglected.

To hold the truth in unrighteousness, then, is to withhold the heart, and life from obeying it; it is to persist in neglect of duty when convinced, and when obligation is seen.

- 3. To hold the truth in unrighteousness, is to refuse to perform duty when it is known. Neglect in these circumstances, is real refusal. There cannot be neglect in the sense of no action at all. The mind must act in opposition, must gird itself and refuse, in order to neglect when obligation is seen.

To hold the truth in unrighteousness, then, is precisely this: when obligation to our fellow men is perceived and admitted, to selfishly refuse to meet the obligation.

- 4. To hold the truth in unrighteousness is to unjustly neglect or refuse to perform our duty to God or man. Ungodliness, or withholding from God, is injustice or unrighteousness toward God.

All, then, who neglect to perform their duty either to God or man, are guilty of holding the truth in unrighteousness in the sense of this text.

IV. What are we to understand by the wrath of God in this text?

I reply, not a selfish anger such as selfish men exercise; but a benevolent, holy indignation, such in kind as a benevolent father or ruler might exercise toward injustice, selfishness, and madness in an undutiful child or subject. The term is a strong one, and is rendered wrath, by which we mean something more than mere anger in a low degree; it implies an intense indignation.

V. I inquire, against whom is this wrath of God revealed from heaven?

I answer,

- 1. Against all persons who do not act upon, and up to their conviction in respect to their duty either to God or man. It is a very common thing to find persons admitting that such and such things they ought to do, and there they stop. They seem to make a virtue of admitting their obligation in words, while they deny it in action.

You press them with their obligation, and they will say--"O yes, I know that I ought--but what then?" There they stop and do not lift a finger to perform their duty.

Now against all such persons whether they be professors of religion or non-professors, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.

- 2. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all who allow themselves in short-comings. I say allow themselves in short-coming, in respect, either to God or man. It is not an uncommon thing for persons, in looking back, to accuse themselves of short-comings, when after all they are not aware of having deliberately and knowingly, at the time, fallen short of their duty.

But observe, I say that the wrath of God is revealed against all who allow themselves in short-comings--who are aware of their duty and really indulge themselves in neglect and short-comings; as if a man owed a debt to a neighbor, and knowingly and deliberately neglected to pay him; or when an individual admits his obligation to love, to confide in, to worship and obey God, and indulges himself in disobedience, or allows himself to neglect to perform his duty to God; against all such, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.

- 3. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all who stop short of living up to their

privileges, as well as their duty.

It is really a mans duty to live up to his privilege; and a man cannot allow himself to live below his privilege, without at the same time allowing himself to live below his duty. It is certainly a man's duty to avail himself of all the means within his reach of promoting his own holiness and usefulness in the highest degree; and to stop short of this, for selfish reasons, is a great crime against God; and therefore the wrath of God is revealed against all such as do this.

- 4. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all who rest, and stop short of full sanctification, full obedience to God as they understand their duty. I say, rest short; by which I mean that they knowingly quiet themselves in this state of short-coming.

There are a great man professors of religion who seem to have very little anxiety about being entirely sanctified, and fully obeying God. If they can believe themselves safe, they seem very well satisfied; although they know they are indulging in more or less sin from day to day.

It is not with them a matter of intense struggle and effort, to render to God full obedience. It is enough for them that they think themselves justified; the question of sanctification they are very willing to postpone.

They say they do not believe in sanctification in this life. They seem to throw up the reins and live on loosely, talk about continually sinning and repenting; while it is evident enough that they do not care to render to God a full and continued obedience. They care but little for sin if they can be forgiven.

They care but little about sanctification if they can ensure justification. Now it is perfectly plain that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all such persons who are living on in known and allowed short-comings in regard to sanctification--sinning and sinning and caring little about it--being anxious only to know that they are safe.

The fact is, such persons are not safe. You should understand this at once, that you are as far as possible from being safe.

You are under the wrath of God which is revealed from heaven against you. You are knowingly and carelessly withholding from God his due; you are allowing yourself in sin, caring more for your justification than for your sanctification.

What is sanctification but full obedience to God? And can you make God believe that you are a sincere Christian, while you are careless about rendering to him, in all things, a full obedience?

- 5. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all whose religion is of the negative rather than of the positive kind.

The law of God is positive. It requires supreme love to God and equal love to man. It requires action toward God and man, intense action, energetic devotion to God and man. Now there are many who seem to suppose that this is the doing nothing bad, as they say.

They run hither and thither, and indulge themselves, and live in most things like the world around them. Their way of spending their time, of spending their money, of using their influence, is such that you enquire, why they do this, and why they do that. "Why!" they reply, "what harm is there in it?"

With them the question is, what harm is there in this or that course of life and not what good will this do? If they live without committing flagrant sin they think they do well. It does not seem so much as to enter into their designs to do all they can for the promotion of God's glory, but only to avoid doing such things as will be an open disgrace to religion. Their religion is a mere negation, if it may be called religion; which, indeed it cannot properly be, for all true religion is love, confidence, worship, obedience. Let all such, then, as are satisfying themselves with this negative form of what they call religion, remember that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against them.

Indeed, there are some whose history seems to be one of omission. They are continually neglecting many forms of duty; and they know it. Perhaps some of you here are admitting from day to day that this, and that, and the other thing is your duty; and yet you never address yourselves seriously to the performance of it.

Some of you are perhaps neglecting secret prayer--are neglecting your Bible--are neglecting to pay your debts--are neglecting in the outward life a great multitude of things, but in regard to God and man, and in your inward state you cannot but know that you are really neglecting to render to God all the love and confidence that are his due, and that you are neglecting to love your neighbor as yourself. Your history is one of omission. You seem to overlook the fact, that omission is the very thing against which this text is arrayed; that this ungodliness and unrighteousness are omissions of duty to God and man.

Again, you seem also to forget that omission is a real withholding, a real refusal; that it is not a state of inaction, but of contrary action--a girding yourself to resist the claims of God and the claims of duty.

Your omission is not a mere passive state, but a state of selfish activity; the omitting to perform your duty to God and man for the sake of gratifying yourself.

Now can you not, some of you, right here, accuse yourself of living a life of omission? Is not this the history of your religion?

Are you not acknowledging from day to day in your conscience that you owe this, and that, and the other duty to God and man; while you are neglecting to perform these duties? Now remember, if this is so, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against you. If you are neglecting any heart duty, or any outward duty--and if you allow

yourselves in this neglect or continue to indulge in this omission, you are as far as possible from being safe. I pray you, lay it to heart.

- 6. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all sinners who neglect repentance and faith; in other words, who neglect to become Christians.
 - (1.) The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all sinners who neglect God, who neglect prayer, and who neglect to perform all the duties enjoined upon every son and daughter of Adam.
 - (2.) The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all procrastinators, whether in or out of the church. By procrastinators, I mean, those who have it in their mind at some future time to perform their duty; and who for some reason put it off for the present. This is the great sin of many persons. They know their duty--they know that now is the accepted time and now is the day of salvation; but for unrighteous reasons they continue to procrastinate, to put God off.
 - (3.) The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all sinners who neglect to do and be what God requires Christians to do and be. All men to whom the Gospel is preached are bound to be Christians immediately.

A great many sinners are constantly watching Christians and accusing them, but they seem not to understand that God requires of them what He requires of Christians, and that in condemning Christians they only condemn themselves; in pointing out the short-comings of Christians they only point out their own. Now sinners, what you suppose God requires of Christians, you are bound to perform yourselves. For you seem to know what the Christian's duty is; you continue to judge the Christian, and therefore you show that you know what he ought to do and what he ought to be. But if you neglect to do and to be what you require of him, then you fall short of your known duty, and the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against you for not doing what you exact of Christians.

- (4.) The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all who know better than they habitually do. Now all sinners are in this state; and this is what constitutes them sinners. They know better than they do; they know their duty but they do it not. And this is that for which the wrath of God is revealed against them.

Impenitent sinners are very apt to think of their sins only as commissions of something outbreaking in the outward life; but they seldom think much of their neglects of duty either to God or man. But it should be understood that all sin resolves itself into either neglect or refusal to render to God and man their due. Indeed, there are many, both professors and non-professors, who allow themselves to live habitually in opposition to their convictions of duty. Now let it be understood that this is the very essence of sin; and against all such persons the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.

VI. Why is the wrath of God thus revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men?

- 1. Neglect of duty implies a knowledge of duty. A man cannot be said to neglect a duty of which he has no knowledge.
- 2. Neglect of duty implies ability to perform it. A man cannot be truly said to neglect that which he has no power to perform.
- 3. Neglect of duty, as I have already said, implies a refusal to do duty. Indeed it involves it. A state of passivity in the presence of perceived obligation being impossible, neglect of duty must involve deliberate and persistent disobedience to God.
- 4. Neglect of known duty to God or man, involves a rejection of God's authority, as not a sufficient reason for action.

It is virtually saying, "What if God does require of me such and such a thing? That is no good reason why I should do it. Who is God that I should obey Him, or what profit should I have if I should pray to Him?"

It involves a most insolent and contemptuous rejection of God's command as being a sufficient reason for action in that direction.

- 5. Holding the truth in unrighteousness involves a deliberate rejection of moral obligation as constituting an influential reason for action.

Observe, in this case the sinner knows his duty, he admits the obligation in words but rejects it in practice.

Now what is this but saying, "What do I care for moral obligation? To be sure, I admit that there is a moral obligation; but what do I care? Do you suppose I am going to be influenced by moral obligation? If you do, you do not know me. I hope you do not think that I am so weak as to yield to a mere moral obligation--to a mere command of God--to a mere sense of duty. Not I."

- 6. Holding the truth in unrighteousness involves a contempt for the idea of duty as being of no real practical account.

"Duty?" says the sinner--"do you think I care for duty? What! my duty to God, and my duty to my neighbor? Talk not to me of duty. What do I care for duty?"

This holding the truth in unrighteousness is a real contempt for duty. It is virtually saying--"You never need expect me to be influenced by that consideration. You never need to tell me of my duty, for I care not for it. I will pursue my inclination, duty in any wise to the contrary notwithstanding. Why do you come to me whining about the idea of duty, and tell me it is my duty to do thus, and thus, and thus? Away with your cant! I will

have nothing to do with duty."

- 7. This holding the truth in unrighteousness, involves a real ruling down of all moral considerations. The consideration of duty to God--the consideration of God's authority--the consideration of God's rights, of man's rights, and of all rights--it is just ruling them down; putting the foot upon them; trampling them under the feet; and saying--"These considerations shall never influence me!"
- 8. This course of conduct in holding the truth in unrighteousness, in holding the mind back from obedience, is of course decisive of the moral attitude. It is taking a deliberate stand against God. It is taking a deliberate open stand before all his subjects, and pouring contempt upon his authority, upon his moral government, and upon all the moral considerations with which he attempts to enforce obedience. It is then taking the attitude of an open rebel, an open enemy, a persistent opponent of God.

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)*.