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Converting Sinners A Christian Duty

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Lecture I

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Text.--James 5:19, 20: "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins."

A subject of present duty and of great practical importance is brought before us in this text. That we may clearly apprehend it, let us

I. Enquire into the true idea of a sinner. What constitutes a sinner?

II. What is conversion? What is it to "convert the sinner from the error of his ways?"

III. In what sense does man convert a sinner?

IV. We must next enquire into the kind of death of which the text speaks, "shall save a soul from death."

V. We now consider the importance of saving a soul from death.

VI. He who converts a sinner not only saves more misery, but confers more happiness than all the world has yet enjoyed, or even all the created universe.

I. What constitutes a sinner?

- 1. A sinner is, essentially, a moral agent. So much he must be, whatever else he may or may not be. He must have free will, in the sense of being able to originate his own activities. He must be the responsible author of his own acts, in such a sense that he is not compelled irresistibly to act one way or another, otherwise than according to his own free choice.

He must also have intellect, so that he can understand his own relations and apprehend

his moral responsibilities. An idiot, lacking this element of constitutional character, is not a moral agent and can not be a sinner.

He must also have sensibility, so that he can be moved to action--so that there can be inducement to voluntary activity, and also a capacity to appropriate the motives for right or wrong action.

These are the essential elements of mind, necessary to constitute a moral agent. Yet these are not all the facts which develop themselves in a sinner.

- 2. He is a selfish moral agent, devoted to his own interests, making himself his own supreme end of action. He looks on his own things, not on the things of others. His own interests, not the interests of others, are his chief concern.

Thus every sinner is a moral agent, acting under this law of selfishness, having free will and all the powers of a moral agent, but making self the great end of all his action. This is a sinner.

- 3. We have here the true idea of sin. It is in an important sense, error. A sinner is one that "erred." "He that converteth a sinner from the error of his ways." It is not a mere mistake, for mistakes are made through ignorance or incapacity. Nor is it a mere defect of constitution, attributable to its author. But it is an "error in his ways." It is missing the mark in his voluntary course of conduct. It is a voluntary divergence from the line of duty. It is not an innocent mistake, but a reckless yielding to impulse. It involves a wrong end--a bad intention--a being influenced by appetite or passion, in opposition to reason and conscience. It is an attempt to secure some present gratification at the expense of resisting convictions of duty. This is most emphatically missing the mark.

II. What is conversion? What is it to "convert the sinner from the error of his ways?"

This error lies in his having a wrong object of life--his own present worldly interests. Hence to convert him from the error of his ways is to turn him from this course to a benevolent consecration of himself to God and to human well-being. This is precisely what is meant by conversion. It is changing the great moral end of action. It supplants selfishness and substitutes benevolence in its stead.

III. In what sense does man convert a sinner?

Our text reads--"If any of you do err from the truth and one convert him"--implying that man may convert a sinner. But in what sense can this be said, and done?

I answer, the change must of necessity be a voluntary one--not a change in the essence of the soul, nor in the essence of the body--not any change in the created constitutional faculties; but a change which the mind itself, acting under various influences, makes as to its own voluntary end of action. It is an intelligent change--the mind, acting intelligently and freely, changes its moral course, and does it for perceived reasons.

The Bible ascribes conversion to various agencies--

(1.) To God. God is spoken of as converting sinners, and Christians with propriety pray to God to do so.

(2.) Christians are spoken of as converting sinners. We see this in our text.

(3.) The truth is also said to convert sinners.

Again, let it be considered, no man can convert another without the co-operation and consent of that other. His conversion consists in his yielding up his will and changing his voluntary course. He can never do this against his own free will. He may be persuaded and induced to change his voluntary course; but to be persuaded is simply to be led to change one's chosen course and choose another.

Even God cannot convert a sinner without his own consent. He cannot, for the simple reason that the thing involves a contradiction. The being converted implies his own consent--else it is no conversion at all. God converts men therefore only as He persuades them to turn from the error of their selfish ways to the rightness of benevolent ways.

So also, man can convert a sinner only in the sense of presenting the reasons that induce the voluntary change and thus persuading him to repent. If he can do this, then he converts a sinner from the error of his ways. But the Bible informs us that man alone never does or can convert a sinner. It holds however that when man acts, humbly depending on God, God works with him and by him. Men are "laborers together with God." They present reasons and God enforces those reasons on the mind. When the minister preaches, or when you converse with sinners, man presents truth, and God causes the mind to see it with great clearness and to feel its personal application with great power. Man persuades and God persuades; man speaks to his ear--God speaks to his heart. Man presents truth through the medium of his senses to reach his free mind; God presses it upon his mind so as to secure his voluntary yielding to its claims. Thus the Bible speaks of sinners as being persuaded;--"Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." In this the language of the Bible is entirely natural. Just as if you should say you had turned a man from his purpose, or that your arguments had turned him, or that his own convictions of truth had turned him. So the language of the Bible on this subject is altogether simple and artless, speaking right out in perfect harmony with the laws of mind.

IV. We must next enquire into the kind of death of which the text speaks, "shall save a soul from death."

- 1. Observe, it is a soul, not a body, that is to be saved from death; consequently we may dismiss all thought of the death of the body in this connection. However truly converted, his body must nevertheless die.
- 2. The passage speaks of the death of the soul.
- 3. By the death of the soul is sometimes meant spiritual death--a state in which the mind is not influenced by truth as it should be. The man is under the dominion of sin and repels the influence of truth.

- 4. Or the death of the soul may be eternal death--the utter loss of the soul, and its final ruin. The sinner is of course spiritually dead, and if this condition were to continue through eternity, this would become eternal death. Yet the Bible represents the sinner, dying unpardoned, as "going away into everlasting punishment," and as being "punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power." To be always a sinner is awful enough--is a death of fearful horror; but how terribly augmented is even this when you conceive of it as heightened by everlasting punishment, far away "from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power!"

V. We now consider the importance of saving a soul from death.

- 1. Our text says, he who converts a sinner saves a soul from death. Consequently he saves him from all the misery, he else must have endured. So much misery is saved.

And this amount is greater in the case of each sinner saved than all that has been experienced in our entire world up to this hour. This may startle you at first view and may seem incredible. Yet you have only to consider the matter attentively and you will see it must be true. That which has no end--which swells utterly beyond all our capacities for computation, must surpass any finite amount, however great.

- 2. Yet the amount of actual misery experienced in this world has been very great. As you go about the great cities in any country you can not fail to see it. Suppose you could ascend some lofty eminence and stretch your vision over a whole continent, just to take in at one glance all its miseries. Suppose you had an eye to see all forms of human woe and measure their magnitude--all the woes of slavery, oppression, intemperance, war, lust, disease, heart-anguish;--suppose you could stand above some battle-field and hear as in one ascending volume all its groans and curses and take the gauge and dimensions of its unutterable woes; suppose you could hear the echo of its agonies as they roll up to the very heavens;--you must say--there is indeed an ocean of agony here; yet all this is only a drop in the bucket compared with that vast amount, defying all calculation, which each sinner lost must endure, and from which each sinner, converted, is saved. If you were to see the cars rush over a dozen men at once, grinding their flesh and bones, you could not bear the sight. Perhaps you would even faint away. O, if you could see all the agonies of the earth accumulated, and could hear the awful groans ascending in one deafening roar that would shake the very earth, how must your nerves quiver! Yet all this would be merely nothing, compared with the eternal sufferings of one lost soul! And this is true, however low may be the degree of this lost soul's suffering, each moment of his existence.
- 3. Yet farther. The amount of suffering thus saved is greater not only than all that ever has been but than all that ever will be endured in this world. And this is true even although the number of inhabitants be supposed to be increased a million-fold, and their miseries be augmented in like proportion. No matter how low the degree of suffering which the sinner would endure, yet our supposition, if the earth's population increased a million-fold, and its aggregate of miseries augmented in like proportion, cannot begin to measure the agonies of the lost spirit.

- 4. Or we may extend our comparison and take in all that has yet been endured in the universe--all the agonies of earth and all the agonies of hell combined, up to this hour--yet even so, our aggregate is utterly too scanty to measure the amount of suffering saved, when one sinner is converted. Nay more, the amount thus saved is greater than the created universe ever can endure in any finite duration. Aye, it is even greater--myriads of times greater, than all finite minds can ever conceive. You may embrace the entire conception of all finite minds, of every man and every angel, of all minds but that of God, and still the man who saves one soul from death saves in that single act more misery from being endured than all this immeasurable amount. He saves more misery, by myriads of times, than the entire universe of created minds can conceive.

I am afraid many of you have never given yourselves the trouble to think of this subject. You are not to escape from this fearful conclusion by saying that suffering is only a natural consequence of sin, and that there is no governmental infliction of pain. It matters not at all whether the suffering be governmental or natural. The amount is all I speak of now. If he continues in his sins, he will be miserable forever by natural law, and therefore the man who converts a sinner from his sins saves all this immeasurable amount of suffering.

You may recollect the illustration used by an old divine who attempted to give an approximate conception of this idea, an enlarged conception by means of the understanding. There are two methods of studying and of endeavoring to apprehend the infinite; one by the reason which simply affirms the infinite; and another by the understanding which only approximates toward it by conceptions and estimates of the finite. Both these modes of conception may be developed by culture. Let a man stand on the deck of a ship and cast his eye abroad upon the shoreless expanse of waters, he may get some idea of the vast; or better, let him go out and look at the stars in the dimmed light of evening; he can get some idea of their number and of the vastness of that space in which they are scattered abroad. On the other hand his reason tells him at once that this space is unlimited. His understanding only helps him to approximate toward this great idea. Let him suppose, as he gazes upon the countless stars of ether that he has the power of rising into space at pleasure and that he does ascend with the rapidity of lightning for thousands of years. Approaching those glorious orbs, one after another, he takes in more and more clear and grand conceptions of their magnitude, as he soars on past the moon, the sun, and other suns of surpassing splendor and glory. So of the conceptions of the understanding in reference to the great idea of eternity.

The old writer to whom I alluded supposes a bird to be removing a globe of earth by taking away a single grain of sand once in a thousand years. What an eternity, almost, it would take! And yet this would not measure eternity.

Suppose, sinner, that it is you yourself who is suffering during all this period and that you are destined to suffer until this supposed bird has removed the last grain of sand away. Suppose you are to suffer nothing more than you have sometimes felt; yet suppose that bird must remove, in this slow process, not this world only--for this is but a little speck, comparatively--but also the whole material universe. Only a single grain at a time!

Or suppose the universe were a million times more extensive than it is, and then that you must be a sufferer through all this time, while the bird removes slowly a single minute grain once in each thousand years! Would it not appear to you like an eternity? If you knew that you must be deprived of all happiness for all time, would not the knowledge sink into your soul with a force perfectly crushing?

But after all, this is only an understanding conception. Let this time thus measured roll on, until all is removed that God ever created or ever can create, even so, it affords scarcely a comparison, for eternity has no end. You can not even approximate towards its end. After the lapse of the longest period you can conceive, you have approached no nearer than you were when you first began. O sinner, "can your heart endure, or your hands be strong in the day when God shall deal thus with you?"

But let us look at still another view of the case.

VI. He who converts a sinner not only saves more misery, but confers more happiness than all the world has yet enjoyed, or even all the created universe.

You have converted a sinner, have you? Indeed! Then think what has been gained! Does any one ask--What then? Let the facts of the case give the answer. The time will come when he will say--In my experience of God and divine things, I have enjoyed more than all the created universe had done up to the general judgment--more than the aggregate happiness of all creatures, during the whole duration of our world; and yet my happiness is only just begun! Onward, still onward--onward forever rolls the deep tide of my blessedness, and evermore increasing!

Then look also at the work in which this converted man is engaged. Just look at it. In some sunny hour when you have caught glimpses of God and of his love and have said--O if this might only last forever! O, you have said, if this stormy world were not around me! O, if my soul had wings like a dove, then would I fly away and be at rest. Those were only aspirations for the rest of heaven--this which the converted man enjoys above is heaven. You must add to this the rich and glorious idea of eternal enlargement--perpetual increase. His blessedness not only endures forever, but increases forever. And this is the bliss of every converted sinner.

If these things be true, then,

- 1. Converting sinners is the work of the Christian life. It is the great work to which we, as Christians, are especially appointed. Who can doubt this?
- 2. It is the great work of life because its importance demands that it should be. It is so much beyond any other work in importance that it cannot be rationally regarded as anything other or less than the great work of life.
- 3. It can be made the great work of life, because Jesus Christ has made provision for it. His atonement covers the human race and lays the foundation so broad that whosoever will may come. The promise of his Spirit to aid each Christian in this work is equally broad, and was

designed to open the way for each one to become a laborer together with God in this work of saving souls.

- 4. Benevolence can never stop short of it. Where so much good can be done and so much misery can be prevented, how is it possible that benevolence can fail to do its utmost?
- 5. Living to save others is the condition of saving ourselves. No man is truly converted who does not live to save others. Every truly converted man turns from selfishness to benevolence, and benevolence surely leads him to do all he can to save the souls of his fellow-man. This is the changeless law of benevolent action.
- 6. The self-deceived are always to be distinguished by this peculiarity--they live to save themselves. This is the chief end of all their religion. All their religious efforts and activities tend toward this sole object. If they can secure their own conversion so as to be pretty sure of it, they are satisfied. Sometimes the ties of natural sympathy embrace those who are especially near to them--but selfishness goes commonly no further--except as a good name may prompt them on.
- 7. Some persons take no pains to convert sinners, but act as if this were a matter of no consequence whatever. They do not labor to persuade men to be reconciled to God.
- 8. Some seem to be waiting for miraculous interposition. They take no pains with their children or friends. Very much as if they felt no interest in the great issue, they wait and wait for God, or miracle to move. Alas, they do nothing in this great work of human life!
- 9. Many professed Christians have no faith in God's blessing, and no expectation, thereby, of success. Consequently they make no effort in faith. Their own experience is good for nothing to help them, because never having had faith, they never have had success. Many ministers preach so as to do no good. Having failed so long, they have lost all faith. They have not gone to work expecting success, and hence they have not had success.
- 10. Many professors of religion, not ministers, seem to have lost all confidence. Ask them if they are doing anything; they answer truly--nothing. But if their hearts were full of the love of souls, or of the love of Christ, they would certainly make efforts. They would at least try to convert sinners from the error of their ways. They would live religion--would hold up its light as a natural spontaneous thing.
- 11. Each one, male or female, of every age, and in any position in life whatsoever, should make it a business to save souls. There are indeed many other things to be done; let them have their place. But don't neglect the greatest of all.
- 12. Many professed Christians seem never to convert sinners. Let me ask you how is it with you? Some of you might reply--Under God, I have been the means of saving some souls. But some of you can not even say this. You know you have never labored honestly and with all your heart for this object. And you do not know that you have ever been the means of converting one

sinner.

What shall I say of those young converts here? Have you given yourselves up to this work? Are you laboring for God? Have you gone to your impenitent friends, even to their rooms and by personal, affectionate entreaty, besought them to be reconciled to God?

By your pen and by every form of influence you can command, have you sought to save souls and do what you can in this work? Have you succeeded?

Suppose all the professors of religion in this congregation were to do this, each in their sphere and each doing all they severally could do, how many would be left unconverted? If each one should say--"I lay myself on the altar of my God for this work; I confess all my past delinquencies; henceforth, God helping me, this shall be the labor of my life;" if each one should begin with removing all the old offences and occasions of stumbling--should publicly confess and deplore his remissness and every other form of public offence, confessing how little you have done for souls, crying out: O how wickedly I have lived in this matter! but I must reform, must confess, repent, and change altogether the course of my life;--if you were all to do this and then set yourselves each in your place, to lay your hand in all earnestness upon your neighbor and pluck him out of the fire--how glorious would be the result!

But to neglect the souls of others and think you shall yet be saved yourself is one of guilt's worst blunders! For unless you live to save others, how can you hope to be saved yourself? "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."

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)*.