

Victory over the World through Faith

Charles G. Finney:

"For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."--[1] John 5:4.

The discussion of this text naturally leads us to make four inquiries.

I. WHAT IS IT TO OVERCOME THE WORLD?

II. WHO ARE THEY THAT OVERCOME?

III. WHY DO THEY OVERCOME THE WORLD?

IV. HOW DO THEY DO IT?

These are the natural questions which a serious mind would ask upon reading this text.

I. What is it to overcome the world?

1. It is to get above the spirit of covetousness which possesses the men of the world. The spirit of the world is eminently the spirit of covetousness. It is a greediness after the things of the world. Some worldly men covet one thing and some another; but all classes of worldly men are living in the spirit of covetousness in some of its forms. This spirit has supreme possession of their minds.

Now the first thing in overcoming the world is, that the spirit of covetousness in respect to worldly things and objects, be overcome. The man who does not overcome this spirit of bustling and scrambling after the good which this world proffers has by no means overcome it.

2. Overcoming the world implies rising above its engrossments. When a man has overcome the world his thoughts are no longer engrossed and swallowed up with worldly things. A man certainly does not overcome the world unless he gets above being engrossed and absorbed with its concerns.

Now we all know how exceedingly engrossed worldly men are with some form of worldly good. One is swallowed up with study; another with politics; a third with money-getting; and a fourth perhaps with fashion and with pleasure; but each in his chosen way makes earthly good the all-engrossing object.

The man who gains the victory over the world must overcome not one form only of its pursuits, but every form--must overcome the world itself and all that it has to present as an allurements to the human heart.

3. Overcoming the world implies overcoming the fear of the world.

It is a mournful fact that most men, and indeed all men of worldly character, have so much regard to public opinion that they dare not act according to the dictates of their consciences when acting thus would incur the popular frown. One is afraid lest his business should suffer if his course runs counter to public opinion; another fears lest if he stand up for the truth it will injure his reputation, and curiously imagines and tries to believe that advocating an unpopular truth will diminish and perhaps destroy his good influence--as if a man could exert a good influence in any possible way besides maintaining the truth.

Great multitudes, it must be admitted, are under this influence of fearing the world; yet some perhaps many of them are not aware of this fact. If you or if they could thoroughly sound the reasons of their backwardness in duty, fear of the world would be found among the chief. Their fear of the world's displeasure is so much stronger than their fear of God's displeasure that they are completely enslaved by it. Who does not know that some ministers dare not preach what they know is true, and even what they know is important truth, lest they should offend some whose good opinion they seek to retain? The society is weak perhaps, and the favour of some rich man in it seems indispensable to its very existence. Hence the terror of these rich men is continually before their eyes when they write a sermon, or preach, or are called to take a stand in favour of any truth or cause which may be unpopular with men of more wealth than piety or conscience. Alas! this bondage to man!

Too many gospel ministers are so troubled by it that their time-serving policy is virtually renouncing Christ and serving the world.

Overcoming the world is thoroughly subduing this servility to men.

4. Overcoming the world implies overcoming a state of worldly anxiety. You know there is a state of great carefulness and anxiety which is common and almost universal among worldly men. It is perfectly natural if the heart is set upon securing worldly good, and has not learned to receive all good from the hand of a great Father and trust him to give or withhold with his own unerring wisdom. But he who loves the world is the enemy of God and hence can never have this filial trust in a parental Benefactor, nor the peace of soul which it imparts. Hence worldly men are almost incessantly in a fever of anxiety lest their worldly schemes should fail. They sometimes get a momentary relief when all things seem to go well; but some mishap is sure to befall them at some point soon, so that scarce a day passes that, brings not with it some corroding anxiety. Their bosoms are like the troubled sea which cannot rest whose waters cast up mire and dirt.

But the man who gets above the world gets above this state of ceaseless and corroding anxiety.

5. The victory under consideration implies that we cease to be enslaved and in bondage to the world in any of its forms.

There is a worldly spirit and there is also a heavenly spirit, and one or the other exists in the heart of every man and controls his whole being. Those who are under the control of the world of course have not overcome the world. No man overcomes the world till his heart is imbued with the spirit of heaven.

One form which the spirit of the world assumes is, being enslaved to the customs and fashions of the day.

It is marvelous to see what a goddess Fashion becomes. No heathen goddess was ever worshipped with costlier offerings or more devout homage or more implicit subjection. And surely no heathen deity since the world began has ever had more universal patronage. Where will you go to find the man of the world or the woman of the world who does not hasten to worship at her shrine?

But overcoming the world implies that the spell of this goddess is broken.

They who have overcome the world are no longer careful either to secure its favour or avert its frown; and the good or the ill opinion of the world is to them a small matter. "To me," said Paul, "it is a small thing to be judged of man's judgment." So of every real Christian; his care is to secure the approbation of God; this is his chief concern, to commend himself to God and to his own conscience. No man has overcome the world unless he has attained this state of mind.

Almost no feature of Christian character is more striking or more decisive than this--indifference to the opinions of the world.

Since I have been in the ministry I have been blessed with the acquaintance of some men who were peculiarly distinguished by this quality of character. Some of you may have known Rev. James Patterson, late of Philadelphia. If so, you know him to have been eminently distinguished in this respect. He seemed to have the least possible disposition to secure the applause of men or avoid their censure. It seemed to be of no consequence to him to commend himself to men. For him it was enough if he might please God.

Hence you were sure to find him in everlasting war against sin, all sin, however popular, however entrenched by custom or sustained by wealth, or public opinion. Yet he always opposed sin with a most remarkable spirit--a spirit of inflexible decision and yet of great mellowness and tenderness. While he was saying the most severe things in the most decided language, you might see the big tears rolling down his cheeks.

It is wonderful that most men never complained of his having a bad spirit. Much as they dreaded his rebuke and writhed under his strong and daring exposures of wickedness, they could never say that Father Patterson had any other than a good spirit. This was a most beautiful and striking exemplification of having overcome the world.

Men who are not thus dead to the world have not escaped its bondage. The victorious Christian is in a state where he is no longer in bondage to man. He is bound only to serve God.

II. We must enquire Who are those that overcome the world?

Our text gives the ready answer: "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world." You cannot fail to observe that this is a universal proposition,--all who are born of God overcome the world--all these, and it is obviously implied-- none others. You may know who are born of God by this characteristic--they overcome the world. Of course the second question is answered.

III. Our next question is, Why do believers overcome the world? On what principle is this result effected?

I answer, this victory over the world results as naturally from the spiritual or heavenly birth as coming into bondage to the world results from the natural birth.

It may be well to revert a moment to the law of connection in the latter case, viz., between coming into the world by natural birth and bondage to the world. This law obviously admits of a philosophical explanation, at once simple and palpable to every one's observation. Natural birth reveals to the mind objects of sense and these only. It brings the mind into contact with worldly things. Of course it is natural that the mind should become deeply interested in these objects thus presented through its external senses, especially as most of them sustain so intimate a relation to our sentient nature and become the first and chief sources of our happiness.

Hence our affections are gradually entwined around these objects, and we become thoroughly lovers of this world ere our eyes have been opened upon it many months.

Now alongside of this universal fact let another be placed of equal importance and not less universal, namely, that those intuitive powers of the mind which were created to take cognizance of our moral relations, and hence to counteract the too great influence of worldly objects, come into action very slowly, and are not developed so as to act vigorously until years are numbered as months are in the case of the external organs of sense. The very early and vigorous development of the latter brings the soul so entirely under the control of worldly objects that when the reason and the conscience come to speak, their voice is little heeded. As a matter of fact, we find it universally true that unless divine power interpose, the bondage to the world thus induced upon the soul is never broken.

But the point which I particularly desired to elucidate was simply this, that natural birth with its attendant laws of physical and mental development, becomes the occasion of bondage to this world.

Right over against this, lies the birth into the kingdom of God by the Spirit. By this the soul is brought into new relations, we might rather say, into intimate contact with spiritual things. The Spirit of God seems to usher the soul into the spiritual world, in a manner strictly analogous to the result of the natural birth upon our physical being. The great truths of the spiritual world are opened to our view through the illumination of the Spirit of God; we seem to see with new eyes, and to have a new world of spiritual objects around us.

As in regard to natural objects, men not only speculate about them, but realize them; so in the case of spiritual children do spiritual things become not merely matters of speculation, but of full and practical realization also. When God reveals himself to the mind, spiritual things are seen in their real light, and make the impression of realities.

Consequently, when spiritual objects are thus revealed to the mind, and thus apprehended, they will supremely interest that mind. Such is our mental constitution that the truth of God when thoroughly apprehended cannot fail to interest us. If these truths were clearly revealed to the wickedest man on earth, so that he should apprehend them as realities, it could not fail to rouse up his soul to most intense action. He might hate the light, and might stubbornly resist the claims of God upon his heart, but he could not fail to feel a thrilling interest in truths that so take hold of the great and vital things of human well-being.

Let me ask, Is there a sinner in this house, or can there be a sinner on this wide earth, who does not see that if God's presence was made as manifest and as real to his mind as the presence of his fellow men, it would supremely engross his soul even though it might not subdue his heart.

This revelation of God's presence and character might not convert him, but it would, at least for the time being, kill his attention to the world.

You often see this in the case of persons deeply convicted; you have doubtless seen persons so fearfully convicted of sin, that they cared nothing at all for their food nor their dress. O, they cried out in the agony of

their souls, what matter all these things to us, if we even get them all, and then must be down in hell!

But these thrilling and all-absorbing convictions do not necessarily convert the soul, and I have alluded to them here only to show the controlling power of realizing views of divine truth.

When real conversion has taken place, and the soul is born of God, then realizing views of truth not only awaken interest, as they might do in an unrenewed mind, but they also tend to excite a deep and ardent love for these truths. They draw out the heart. Spiritual truth now takes possession of his mind, and draws him into its warm and life-giving embrace. Before, error, falsehood, death, had drawn him under their power; now the Spirit of God draws him into the very embrace of God. Now he is begotten of God, and breathes the spirit of sonship. Now, according to the Bible, "the seed of God remaineth in him," that very truth, and those movings of the [S]pirit which gave him birth into the kingdom of God, continue still in power upon his mind, and hence he continues a Christian, and as the Bible states it, "he cannot sin, because he is born of God." The seed of God is in him, and the fruit of it brings his soul deeply into sympathy with his own Father in heaven.

Again, the first birth makes us acquainted with earthly things, the second with God; the first with the finite, the second with the infinite; the first with things correlated with our animal nature, the second with those great things which stand connected with our spiritual nature, things so lovely, and so glorious as to overcome all the ensnarements of the world.

Again, the first begets a worldly, and the second a heavenly temper, under the first, the mind is brought into a snare--under the second, it is delivered from that snare. Under the first, the conversation is earthly--under the second, "our conversation is in heaven."

But we must pass to inquire,

IV. How this victory over the world is achieved.

The great agent is the Holy Spirit. Without him, no good result is ever achieved in the Christian's heart or life.

The text, you observe, says, "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." But here the question might be raised: Does this mean, that faith of itself overcomes the world, or, is this the meaning, that we overcome by or through our faith? Doubtless the latter is the precise meaning. Believing in God, and having realizing impressions of his truth and character made upon our mind by the Holy Ghost given to those who truly believe, we gain the victory over the world.

Faith implies three things. 1. Perception of truth. 2. An interest in it. 3. The committal or giving up of the mind to be interested and controlled by these objects of faith.

Perception of the truth must come first in order, for there can be no belief of unknown and unperceived truth. Next, there must be an interest in the truth, which shall wake up the mind to fixed and active attention; and thirdly, there must be a voluntary committal of the mind to the control of truth. The mind must wholly yield itself up to God, to be governed entirely by his will, and to trust him and him alone as its own present and eternal portion.

Again, faith receives Christ. The mind first perceives Christ's character and his relations to us--sees what he does for us, and then deeply feeling its own need of such a Saviour, and of such a work wrought in and for us as Jesus alone can do, it goes forth to receive and embrace Jesus as its own Saviour. This action of the soul in receiving and embracing Christ is not sluggish--it is not a state of dozing quietism. No; it involves the soul's most strenuous activity. And this committal of the soul must become a glorious, living, energizing principle--the mind not only perceiving but yielding itself up with the most fervid intensity to be Christ's and to receive all the benefits of his salvation into our own souls.

Again, faith receives Christ into the soul as King, in all his relations, to rule over the whole being--to have our heart's supreme confidence and affection--to receive the entire homage of our obedience and adoration; to rule, in short, over us, and fulfil all the functions of supreme King over our whole moral being. Within our very souls we receive Christ to live and energize there, to reign forever there as on his own rightful throne.

Now a great many seem to stop short of this entire and perfect committal of their whole soul to Christ. They stop short perhaps with merely perceiving the truth, satisfied and pleased that they have learned the theory of the gospel. Or perhaps some go one step further, and stop with being interested--with having their feelings

excited by the things of the gospel, thus going only to the second stage; or perhaps they seem to take faith but not Christ; they think to believe, but after all do not cordially, and with all the heart welcome Christ himself into the soul.

All these various steps stop short of really taking hold of Christ. They none of them result in giving the victory over the world.

The true Bible doctrine of faith represents Christ as coming into the very soul. "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and sup with him, and he with me." What could more forcibly and beautifully teach the doctrine that by faith Christ is introduced into the very soul of the believer to dwell there by his gracious presence?

Since my mind has been drawn to the subject, I have been astonished to see how long I have been in a purblind state of perception in respect to this particular view of faith. Of a long time I had scarcely seen it; now I see it beaming forth in lines of glory on almost every page. The Bible seems to blaze with the glorious truth, Christ in the soul, the hope of glory; God, Christ, dwelling in our body as in a temple. I am amazed that a truth so rich and so blessed should have been seen so dimly, when the Bible reveals it so plainly. Christ received into the very soul by faith, and thus brought into the nearest possible relations to our heart and life;--Christ himself becoming the all-sustaining Power within us, and thus securing the victory over the world;--Christ, living and energizing in our hearts--this is the great central truth in the plan of sanctification, and this no Christian should fail to understand, as he values the victory over the world and the living communion of the soul with its Maker.

REMARKS.

1. It is in the very nature of the case impossible that if faith receive Christ into the soul, it should not overcome the world. If the new birth actually brings the mind into this new state, and brings Christ into the soul, then of course Christ will reign in that soul; the supreme affections will be yielded most delightfully to him, and the power of the world over that mind will be broken. Christ cannot dwell in any soul without absorbing the supreme interest of that soul. And this is of course equivalent to giving the victory over the world.

2. He who does not habitually overcome the world is not born of God. In saying this, I do not intend to affirm that a true Christian may not sometimes be overcome by sin; but I do affirm that overcoming the world is the general rule, and falling into sin is only the exception. This is the least that can be meant by the language of our text, and by similar declarations which often occur in the Bible. Just as in the passage--"He that is born of God doth not commit sin, and he cannot sin because he is born of God,"--nothing less can be meant than this--that he cannot sin uniformly--cannot make sinning his business, and can sin if at all, only occasionally and aside from the general current of his life. In the same manner we should say of a man who is in general truthful, that he is not a liar.

I will not contend for more than this respecting either of these passages; but for so much as this I must contend, that the new-born souls here spoken of do in general overcome the world. The general fact respecting them is that they do not sin and are not in bondage to Satan. The affirmations of Scripture respecting them must at least embrace their general character.

3. What is a religion good for that does not overcome the world? What is the benefit of being born into such a religion, if it leave the world still swaying its dominion over our hearts? What avails a new birth which after all fails to bring us into a likeness to God, into the sympathies of his family and of his kingdom, which leaves us still in bondage to the world and to Satan? What can there be of such a religion more than the name? With what reason can any man suppose that such a religion fits his heart for heaven, supposing it leaves him earthly-minded, sensual, and selfish.

4. We see why it is that infidels have proclaimed the gospel of Christ to be a failure. You may not be aware that of late infidels have taken the ground that the gospel of Christ is a failure. They maintain that it professes to bring men out from the world, but fails to do so; and hence is manifestly a failure. Now you must observe that the Bible does indeed affirm, as infidels say, that those who are truly born of God do overcome the world. This we cannot deny and should not wish to deny it. Now if the infidel can show that the new birth fails to produce this result, he has carried his point, and we must yield ours. This is perfectly plain, and there can be no escape for us.

But the infidel is in fault in his premises. He assumes the current Christianity of the age as a specimen of real religion, and builds his estimate upon this. He proves, as he thinks, and perhaps truly proves that the current Christianity does not overcome the world.

We must demur to his assuming this current Christianity as real religion. For this religion of the mass of nominal professors does not answer the descriptions given of true piety in the Word of God. And moreover, if this current type of religion were all that the gospel and the divine Spirit can do for lost man, then we might as well give up the point in controversy with the infidel; for such a religion could not give us much evidence of coming from God, and would be of very little value to man;--so little as scarcely to be worth contending for. Truly if we must take the professedly Christian world as Bible Christians, who would not be ashamed and confounded in attempting to confront the infidel? We know but too well that the great mass of professed Christians do not overcome the world, and we should be confounded quickly if we were to maintain that they do. Those professed Christians themselves know that they do not overcome the world. Of course they could not testify concerning themselves that in their own case the power of the gospel is exemplified.

In view of facts like these, I have often been astonished to see ministers setting themselves to persuade their people that they are really converted, trying to lull their fears and sustain their tottering hopes. Vain effort! Those same ministers, it would seem, must know that they themselves do not overcome the world, and equally well must they know that their people do not. How fatal then to the soul must be such efforts to "heal the hurt of God's professed people slightly; crying peace, peace, when there is no peace!"

Let us sift this matter to the bottom, pushing the inquiry--Do the great mass of professed Christians really overcome the world? It is a fact beyond question that with them the things of this world are the realities, and the things of God are mere theories. Who does not know that this is the real state of great multitudes in the nominal church?

Let the searching inquiry run through this congregation--What are those things that set your soul on fire--that stir up your warmest emotions and deeply agitate your nervous system? Are these the things of earth, or the things of heaven? the things of time, or the things of eternity? the things of self, or the things of God?

How is it when you go into your closets?--do you go there to seek and find God? Do you in fact find there a present God, and do you hold communion there as friend with friend? How is this?

Now you certainly should know that if your state is such that spiritual things are mere theories and speculations, you are altogether worldly and nothing more. It would be egregious folly and falsehood to call you spiritual-minded, and for you to think yourselves spiritual, would be the most fatal and foolish self-deception. You give none of the appropriate proofs of being born of God. Your state is not that of one who is personally acquainted with God, and who loves him personally with supreme affection.

5. Until we can put away from the minds of men the common error that the current Christianity of the church is true Christianity, we can make but little progress in converting the world. For in the first place we cannot save the Church itself from bondage to the world in this life, nor from the direst doom of the hypocrite in the next. We cannot unite and arm the Church in vigorous onset upon Satan's kingdom so that the world may be converted to God. We cannot even convince intelligent men of the world that our religion is from God, and brings to fallen men a remedy for their depravity. For if the common Christianity of the age is the best that can be, and this does not give men the victory over the world, what is it good for? And if it really is of little worth or none, how can we hope to make thinking men prize it as of great value?

6. There are but very few infidels who are as much in the dark as they profess to be on these points. There are very few of that class of men who are not acquainted with some humble Christians, whose lives commend Christianity and condemn their own ungodliness. Of course they know the truth, that there is a reality in the religion of the Bible, and they blind their own eyes selfishly and most foolishly when they try to believe that the religion of the Bible is a failure and that the Bible is therefore a fabrication. Deep in their heart lies the conviction that here and there are men who are real Christians, who overcome the world and live by a faith unknown to themselves. In how many cases does God set some burning examples of Christian life before those wicked, skeptical men, to rebuke them for their sin and their skepticism--perhaps their own wife or their children, their neighbours or their servants. By such means the truth is lodged in their mind, and God has a witness for himself in their consciences.

I have perhaps before mentioned a fact which occurred at the South, and was stated to me by a minister of the gospel who was acquainted with the circumstances of the case. There resided in that region a very worldly and a most ungodly man, who held a great slave property, and was withal much given to horse-racing. Heedless of all religion and avowedly skeptical, he gave full swing to every evil propensity. But wicked men must one day see trouble; and this man was taken sick and brought to the very gates of the grave. His weeping wife and

friends gather round his bed, and begin to think of having some Christian called in to pray for the dying man's soul. Husband, said the anxious wife, shall I not send for our minister to pray with you before you die? No, said he, I know him of old; I have no confidence in him; I have seen him too many times at horse-races; there he was my friend and I was his; but I don't want to see him now.

But who shall we get, then? continued the wife. Send for my slave Tom, replied he; he is one of my hostlers. I have often overheard him praying and I know he can pray; besides I have watched his life and his temper, and I never saw anything in him inconsistent with Christian character;--call him in, I should be glad to hear him pray.

Tom comes slowly and modestly in, drops his hat at the door, looks on his sick and dying master;--Tom, said the dying skeptic,--do you ever pray? do you know how to pray? can you pray for your dying master and forgive him? O yes, massa, with all my heart; and drops on his knees and pours out a prayer for his soul.

Now the moral of this story is obvious. Place the skeptic on his dying bed, let that solemn hour arrive, and the inner convictions of his heart be revealed, and he knows of at least one man who is a Christian. He knows one man whose prayers he values more than all the friendship of all his former associates. He knows now that there is such a thing as Christianity; and yet you cannot suppose that he has this moment learned a lesson he never knew before. No, he knew just as much before; an honest hour has brought the inner convictions of his soul to light. Infidels generally know more than they have honesty enough to admit.

7. The great error of those who profess religion but are not born of God is this:--they are trying to be Christians without being born of God. They need to have that done to them which is said of Adam--"God breathed into him the breath of life, and he became a living soul." Their religion has in it none of the breath of God: it is a cold, lifeless theory; there is none of the living vitality of God in it. It is perhaps a heartless orthodoxy, and they may take a flattering unction to their hearts that their creed is sound; but do they love that truth which they profess to believe? They think, it may be, that they have zeal, and that their zeal is right and their heart right; but is their soul on fire for God and his cause? Where are they, and what are they doing? Are they spinning out some fond theory, or defending it at the point of the sword? Ah, do they care for souls? Does their heart tremble for the interests of Zion? Do their very nerves quiver under the mighty power of God's truth? Does their love for God and for souls set their orthodoxy and their creeds on fire so that every truth burns in their souls and glows forth from their very faces? If so, then you will not see them absent from the prayer meetings and from the class meetings; but you will see that divine things take hold of their soul with overwhelming interest and power. You will see them living Christians, burning and shining lights in the world. Brethren, it cannot be too strongly impressed on every mind that the decisive characteristic of true religion is energy, not apathy: that its vital essence is life not death.