

Charles G. Finney:

"How much owest thou unto my Lord?" Luke 16:5

These words are part of the parable of the unjust steward. In this parable Christ teaches the importance of using wealth so as to fulfill the conditions of being received into heaven.

It is not my purpose to comment on the parable itself. I select this verse as my text, not for its doctrine, but for its suggestions. In this way texts are sometimes selected, not as teaching any special doctrine, but because they forcibly suggest truths elsewhere taught.

This question--"How much owest thou unto my Lord?" leads us to consider,

I. The rights of God. These should be considered in several different relations.

Our age is remarkable for a great deal of talk about rights;--inalienable rights; rights of the North and of the South; State rights; Federal rights and Woman's rights;--every other sort of rights but God's rights. On the latter, little is said, little seems to be thought. I propose to speak to you this morning in behalf of God's rights; and,

1. His rights as Creator of the universe. That he is the sole Creator of the universe is a fact assumed on all hands, and therefore there is no occasion to prove it.

This fact must invest him with an absolute right of property in everything made, and pre-eminently in the intelligent beings on whom he has conferred his richest blessings.

Let it be noted that the rights of property resting in all other beings but God are relative;--God's only are absolute. A right that a man has to his coat or his wages may be good as against the claim of his fellow-man, but is no right as against the claims of God. God's rights, on the contrary, are absolute, in the sense of being every where and always good--good against all other claims possible or conceivable.

2. Let us also consider his rights as conditioned on his susceptibilities.

Being a moral agent, with infinite sensibilities to happiness, he must have an infinite claim on all the moral subjects of his government to promote his happiness. Deeply susceptible to the happiness of having affectionate children to love and trust him, this very susceptibility creates an obligation on their part to render him the love and homage which will conduce to his happiness. This consideration seems to be strangely overlooked by most of his creatures in this world.

3. Next, let us study his rights as conditioned on his natural and moral attributes.*

The natural attributes of God; omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, etc., are all in their nature infinite. Whatever claim on us and right on his part can result from such attributes, must therefore be unlimited, because there can be no limit to his knowledge, power or presence.

His moral attributes; benevolence, justice, mercy, etc., are all perfect in kind and in degree, and hence God's right on the score of possessing these attributes must be unlimited.

The mutual relations existing between these two classes of attributes serve to perfect their claim on us. For if God were perfectly good, yet without omniscience and wisdom, he might make mistakes. If he were ever so well disposed, yet lacked the requisite power to carry out his purposes, such a failure must make an important deduction from the respect due him and from the trust we might repose in his government. But now, being not only good but all-wise and all-powerful, he never can mistake and never can fail in any of his endeavors. Hence no subject of his can ever doubt that his claims are infinite; none, that he deserves our implicit and perfect confidence. This will not be denied, yet it may not have been well considered.

I have said that on the mere ground of his susceptibility to happiness, he has a claim on our benevolence. I now add, that on the mere ground of his goodness, he has an infinite claim on our complacency.

On grounds already presented he has a claim on our cordial affection. Perfect goodness constitutes an eternal

foundation for this claim.

Being both wise and good, he has the highest possible claims on our sympathy. Himself engaged in the noblest object possible--that of blessing his great family to the utmost extent of his resources, he rightly claims the cordial co-operation of all intelligent beings. Every one of them is bound to promote this same object with all his powers. The same reasons that move God to labor for this end should also move his creatures. Of course this implies that God has a right to our universal and perfect obedience. Being wise and good, he is bound to rule; the interest of his moral universe bind him; and consequently, they equally bind us to obey.

This obligation includes the universal submission of all his creatures to everything he does or omits to do. It is their business to acquiesce in all his ways and with unqualified confidence and resignation. And we should not make a virtue of a forced submission, yielding to his will because we cannot help it; but should submit to his doings because we know he is worthy to be trusted. Even when we cannot fathom the reasons of his course, we yet know he must have good reasons, and are bound to honor him by the most implicit confidence.

God has a claim also on our universal adoration and praise. He rightfully claims that we should acknowledge his attributes and duly appreciate his character, and that we should also commend his character and his infinite worthiness to others. No one can honestly deny this.

Let us also consider those rights of God which are conditioned on our dependence and on his fatherly care. We live and move and have our being in him. He feeds and clothes us; sustains us in life and crowns this life with his love. Our dependence on him is absolute and perfect, since we have no power to make our own blood to flow, or lungs to heave or our digestive organs to work. Not one of these life-processes is under our own control, so that we can dispense with God's upholding hand.

He sent these young people here to school; supported them before they came here; gives them life and health and all things. How much do you think it has cost him already? Sometimes persons seem quite thoughtless of what God does for them and how much it costs him to supply their wants. One winter during my absence from home, my eldest son thought he would keep account with his mother of work done and of benefits received. He kept it faithfully one week. When he came to settlement, he was greatly surprised to find himself so deeply in debt. Notwithstanding he had done some little things, he found he had by no means paid for his board, room, tuition and clothing. He looked very thoughtful. It was a new idea that he was always to be in debt, and, so deeply in debt too. What could he do?

So it would be in your account with God. Perhaps you have never thought of it; but if you ever were to think of it, you would see that it costs far more to supply your wants than you have been wont to think. How much owest thou unto my Lord for all his care in supplying your wants?

I once met an old man who used tobacco, and asked him how much it had cost, and how much he supposed God had charged against him for his waste of God's money on this filthy indulgence. I said to him--Estimate also how much time it has wasted and how much of your strength; how much mental power; and how much you have lost of the spirit of prayer. He paused a few moments, and said "I never thought of it in this light before. I do not know what I can say for myself."

God has been every way your benefactor. Now, what has he a right to expect from you? Certainly, that you should abstain from everything injurious to yourself or to others. If parents may demand so much as this from their children, how much more may God, of his! You cannot hear the conduct of ungrateful children spoken of without tears. What, you exclaim, can that son so abuse his own father, and the mother that bare him! Can he forget how they watched around his bed in his sickness, and bore with him in his waywardness and folly?

These obligations you say are not mere abstractions by any means, but are the most solemn realities. Yet they are as nothing, compared with the rights of God and the claims he has on his creatures, and the wrongs done him when he is treated with ingratitude of heart or life.

[4.] Let us next consider his rights as conditioned upon redemption. O might we only see what an amount of obligation he has rolled upon us by redeeming us from the curse of the law and at such a cost!

Think how he took us out of the hands of public justice--a thing he had no right to do and could not honorably do until he had first honored public justice and satisfied its claims. Do not start at this and say--has not God the right to do anything he pleases? Let it be considered that although God has rights, so also have the universe of beings whom he had made. For their sakes, God could not pardon one sinner, until he had duly regarded the

claims of public justice. This he might accomplish in either of two ways. He might execute the penalty on every sinner, or he might devise some equivalent which should answer governmentally the same purpose, inasmuch as it would equally manifest the heart of the King towards his law and the welfare of his subjects. The latter course was chosen, and a substitute was found in his own beloved Son on whom he "laid the iniquities of us all."

How much did he pay? Suppose there is a similar exigency upon you. You are a public officer. It devolves on you to sustain law by administering the penalty, or its equivalent. The law is broken; will you smite, or will you spare?

You have an only son, dear to your heart. Can you give him up to shame and to an agonizing death for the sake of safely pardoning those transgressors? Can you estimate how much a sacrifice of this sort would cost you?

God has bought you with a price. Bought? Did he not own you altogether before? Yes, but you had brought yourself into such relations to public justice that he must needs buy you again, or you are lost. Now, what are his rights as conditioned on his having paid the price of your soul--paid it too by the blood of his own and only Son! Does not this purchase intensify his claims and augment them exceedingly?

Suppose you had violated the laws of this State, and the Governor had sacrificed his own son to deliver you. Would you not feel that he had fresh claims on you, immensely greater than ever before? You had no claims on him but those of your own wretchedness, and yet he gave heed to those claims. And yet all this, if true, would give us but a faint illustration of what God has done for you through the sacrifice of his Son. Have you ever considered how vast, how deep, how infinite your obligations to him must be? Surely he has a right to your deep, unselfish, and infinite devotion. Christ died for all, that they who live by his death should not henceforth live to themselves, but to him who hath loved them and given himself for them. Ought you not to devote to him a life thus saved--a soul thus redeemed? What! Has he redeemed you from death that you might oppose him and live to yourself? Do you not see that he has a claim on you for all your possible love and service? Surely there is no service possible on your part which is not most emphatically due to him who hath loved and redeemed us.

God's rights are peculiar and infinitely great. They are peculiar, because none are altogether like them in kind; none can ever approach them in degree. In the broad field of human relations, there are some rights which are analogous,--so much so that they aid us in understanding the nature of God's claims on us; yet none can be found in all respect like his. Thus for example no rights of property can be absolute save those of God. All other property-rights are only relative. My rights to my property are good against the claims of fellow-beings; but they are nothing against the claims of God. He owns me and mine. But my fellow-beings do not own either.

God's rights are peculiar in degree. The rights of no other being are infinite; his are. No being has infinite susceptibilities but God; consequently none but God has a claim on his creatures for infinite benevolence.

There is no other being whose rightful authority is universal and infinite. The rights of every other being to authority are so far below his that we must regard them as infinitely less. All the rights of parents to authority over their children--of kings to rule over their subjects,--all vanish to nothing compared with his. Yet parents and kings have rights of authority. But they are only the shadow, of which God's infinite authority is the substance.

What would any of you who are students think of yourself if you had trampled on the reasonable authority of one of your teachers? If you had a just sense of your own meanness, you would be ashamed to be seen in the streets--ashamed to hold up your head. How much more if you had contemned the whole Faculty! You would feel within you the deep mutterings of self-reproach, just indignation and shame, because you had set at nought an authority which you are bound to respect.

Alas how little men think of their obligation to love and honor God!

There is no other being whose rights and claims are sustained by every possible consideration. Let any one of you look at the considerations that bear upon your relations to God. Is there any other being of whom it is true that obligation comes from every possible source--grows out of every relation, presses you from every side, springs up from every spot beneath your feet and looks down with authority from every point above you? Truly there is no limit and no measure to this obligation.

God has a right to claim that every man should treat himself and every body else as belonging of right to him.

He has a right therefore to keep an account with you and to charge you with every meal he puts on your table and gives you health to partake; with every breath you draw; with all the strength you have to use; with all that property which should be used for him. Why not? Is not this true? You know and must admit it. And you also know that if these gifts of God are not so used for him, he is really wronged; and more wronged than we can ever be by any robbery of what we call ours. The wrong is higher in kind, by so much as his rights and claims are greater and higher in their nature than ours can be.

Moreover, it is not only true that a wrong inflicted on God is higher and more aggravated than any wrong against man can be, but it is also true that he will realize and feel it more keenly than we ever can. The more holy a man is the more keenly will he feel any injustice. No matter whether the injustice be done against himself, or against someone else. He may have a forgiving spirit and yet may feel the wrong only the more keenly. He will feel it the more by how much the greater his holiness may be.

So God must have a keener sense of the injustice done to him than any creature can have of the injustice done against a creature. Yet farther; God's sense of this wrong and injustice is greater than the aggregate of all the wrong and of all the sense of wrong and injustice ever felt in the universe. You talk about the sense of wrong felt by the slave. No doubt it is often keen. You speak of the wrong done to parents by their ungrateful children;--but what is all this compared with that which God experiences and which he suffers?

What will you think of the forbearance of God--say, ye who have suffered injustice so long and have felt the pang so keenly? You have been a slave perhaps and you have felt the iron of oppression enter into your very soul. You have felt a sense of wrong enkindled in your bosom, which is seemed to you could never be extinguished--and you cried out--How long, O Lord; O Lord, how long wilt Thou not avenge our blood! If you were to be reprov'd for this intense feeling, you would reply--you need to be a slave yourself and to feel these wrongs in your own bosom; then you could better judge! It is only a mockery of others' unknown woes, for you to talk about meekness and patience, when you know nothing about this sense of wrong!

How much more keenly God must feel! Who can measure the depth of the keenness of his sense of the wrongs done to him?

We sometimes see women feel deeply indignant underneath the wrongs they suffer. This may be not without some reason. But let us look into the reason God has for feeling this sense of injustice. Come, count up all the wrongs heaped on him; measure all the accumulated sense of wrong ever felt in the universe; what is all this, compared to the sense of wrong felt by God, coming upon him from the abuse he receives from his creatures?

Yet God's forbearance holds out still. His infinite heart waits yet. His patience and forbearance are not yet exhausted. O how would you feel! You think it an insult if anyone whispers in your ear a hint about longer forbearance. You cannot bear it. Then what will you think of God's unutterable forbearance and long-suffering?

(TO BE CONTINUED)