The Wrath of God Against Those Who Withstand His Truth

Charles G. Finney:

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness." -- Romans i. 18.

THE following context shows that in these words the apostle has his eye especially on those who, not having a written revelation from God, might yet know him in his works of nature. Paul's view is that God's invisible attributes become apparent to the human mind, ever since the creation of our world -- being revealed by the things he has made. In and by means of these works, we may learn his eternal power and his real divinity. Hence all men have some means of knowing the great truths that pertain to God, our infinite Creator. And hence God may, with the utmost propriety, hold men responsible for accepting this truth reverently, and rendering to their Creator the homage due. For withholding this, they are utterly without excuse.

In discussing the subject presented in our text, let us inquire, first --

I. What is the true idea of unrighteousness?

Beyond question, it cannot be less than the negation of righteousness, and may imply more or less of positive wickedness. Here the question will arise, What is righteousness? To which I answer, rightness -- moral rightness, the original term being used in regard to material things, to denote what is straight; as, for example, a straight line. Unrighteousness, the opposite of this, must mean what is morally crooked, distorted -- not in harmony with the rightness of God's law. To denote sin, the Scriptures employ some terms which properly signify a negation, or utter absence of what should be. Some theologians have maintained that the true idea of sin is simply negative, supposing sin to consist in not doing and not being what one ought to do and to be. This idea is strongly implied in our text. Sin is, indeed, a neglect to do known duty and a refusal to comply with known obligation. Inasmuch as love is required always and of all men, this must be a state of real disobedience. Suffice it, then, to say, that unrighteousness is an omission -- a known omission -- a refusal to be what we should, and to do what we should. Of course it is only and wholly voluntary. The mind's refusal to obey God is a matter of its own free choice.

II. What is implied in "holding the truth in unrighteousness?"

The meaning of the original term "hold" is to hold back, to restrain. The idea here is that the man restrains the legitimate influence of the truth, and will not let it have its proper sway over his will.

The human mind is so constituted that truth is its natural stimulus. This stimulus of truth would, if not restrained and held back, lead the mind naturally to obey God. The man holds back the truth through his own unrighteousness, when, for selfish reasons, he overrules and restrains its natural influence, and will not suffer it to take possession and hold sway over his mind.

III. What is intended by "the wrath of God revealed from heaven?" and Why is it thus revealed against all such unrighteousness?

The obvious sense is that God, manifesting himself from heaven, has revealed his high and just displeasure against all restraining of the truth and withstanding of its influence.

Before I proceed to show why this is, I must be permitted to come very near to some of you whom I see before me this day, and talk to you in great frankness and faithfulness. I do not charge on you that you have been outwardly immoral, but you have restrained the truth, you have withstood its influence. You are therefore the very persons against whom the wrath of God is said to be revealed. This is true of every one of you who has not given himself up to the influence of truth. You have restrained that natural influence; therefore, against you God has revealed his wrath.

This is a terrible thing. The wrath of a king is terrible; how much more so is the wrath of God! Ah, who can stand before him when once he shall arise in his wrath to avenge his truth and his own glorious name!

Why does God's wrath wax hot against this sin? Comprehensively, the reason is this, Withstanding the truth is resisting God's revealed claims of love and obedience, and is therefore the whole of sin. All is comprised in it. This is the very essence -- the true idea of sin; it is deliberate, intelligent, and intentional rebellion against God. There could be no obligation until your conscience affirms it to yourself. The conscience cannot thus affirm

obligation until there is some knowledge of God revealed to the mind; but when this knowledge is revealed, then conscience must and will affirm obligation. Subsequently to this point, the more conscience is developed, the more it unfolds, and the more strongly it affirms your obligation to obey God. Suppose a person were created asleep. Until he awakes, there could be in his mind no knowledge of God -- not one idea of God, and consequently no sense of obligation to obey him. But as soon as the moral functions of the reason and the conscience create a sense of obligation, then the mind is brought to a decision. It must then either choose to obey or to disobey God. It must elect either to take God's law as its rule of duty or to reject it.

The alternative of rejecting God makes it necessary to hold back the truth and withstand its claims. We might almost say that these processes are substantially identical -- resisting the natural influence of God's truth on the mind, and withstanding the known claims of God. When you know the truth concerning God, the great question being whether or not you will obey it, if your heart says No! you do of course resist the claims of truth. You hold it back through your own unrighteousness.

The very apprehending of moral truth concerning God renders it impossible to be indifferent. Once seeing God's claims you cannot avoid acting upon them one way or the other. Hence to stop there after your duty is made known, and hold your minds aloof from obedience, is being just as wicked as you can be. You disown your whole obligation towards God, and practically say unto him, "Depart from me, for I desire not the knowledge of thy ways." Is not this as wicked as you can be, with the light you may have at the time? What more wicked thing could you do?

Let us look at this matter a little farther. Holding back the truth through unrighteousness implies the total rejection of the moral law as a rule of duty. This must be the case, because, when light concerning the meaning of this law comes before the man, he repels it and resists its claims, thus virtually saying, That law is no rule of duty to me. Thus resisting the influence of truth, he practically denies all obligations to God. Truth coming before his mind, he perceives his obligation, but he withholds his mind from its sway.

You may probably have observed that some persons seem to have no sense of any other obligation save that created by human law. Legal obligation can reach them, but not moral. They will not pay an honest debt unless it is in such a shape that the strong hand of the law can take hold of them. Others have no sensibility to any claims save those that minister to their business reputation. Take away their fear of losing this; remove all the inducements to do right, save those that pertain to moral obligation, and see if they will ever do anything.

Now such men practically reject and deny God's rights altogether, and, equally so, their own obligations to God. Their conduct, put into words, would read, I have some respect for human law and some fear of human penalty; but, for God's law or penalty either, I care nothing!

It is easy to see that to hold back the truth thus is the perfection of wickedness. For suppose a man refrains from sinning, only because of his obligations to human laws. Then he shows that he fears human penalties only, and has no fear of God before his eyes.

Again, this holding the truth in unrighteousness settles all questions as to the moral character. You may know the man with unerring certainty. His position is taken; his course is fixed; as to moral obligation, he cares nothing. The fact perceived, moral obligation does not decide his course at all. He becomes totally dishonest. This settles the question of his character.

Until he reveres God's authority, there is not a particle of moral goodness in him. He does not act with even common honesty. Of course his moral character towards God is formed and is easily known. If he had any moral honesty, the perceived fact of his own moral obligation would influence his mind. But we see it does not at all; he shuts down the gate on all the claims of truth, and will not allow them to sway his will. Hence it must be that his heart is fully committed to wickedness.

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all who thus hold back the truth, because this attitude of the will shows that you are reckless of your obligations towards God. It shows that, with you, a moral claim on your heart and conscience goes for nothing. If you restrain the truth from influencing your mind, this very fact proves that you do not mean to serve God. Some of you know that you are not doing what you see to be your duty. You are conscious that the presence of known duty does not move you. You have not done one act of obedience to God's claims because they are God's.

Again, not only does this settle the question of moral character -- which is of itself a good reason for God's wrath; but it also settles the question of moral relations. Because it shows that your moral character is

altogether corrupt and wrong, it also shows that, in regard to moral relations, you are really God's enemy. From that moment when you resist the claims of moral truth, God must regard you as his enemy, and not by any means as his obedient subject. Not in any figurative sense, but in its most literal sense, you are his enemy, and therefore he must be highly displeased with you. If he were not, his own conscience would condemn him. You must know that it must be his duty to reveal to you this displeasure. Since he must feel it, he ought to be open and honest with you. You could not, in reason, wish him to he otherwise. All of you who know moral truth, yet obey it not; who admit obligation which yet you refuse to obey, you are the men who hold the truth in unrighteousness. Let this be settled in every one of your minds, that if you restrain the influence of any truth known concerning God and your duty, then against you is his wrath revealed from heaven.

IV. We must next inquire, Wherein and how is this wrath revealed?

Perhaps some of you are already making this inquiry. Moralists are wont to make it, and to say, "We do not see any wrath coming. If we are as good as professors of religion, why shall we not be saved as well as they?"

Wherein then is God's wrath revealed against this great wickedness?

1. Your conscience affirms that God must be displeased with you. It certifies to you beforehand that you are guilty, and that God cannot accept you.

2. The remorse which will sometimes visit such sinners yet more confirms God's displeasure. True, the feeling of remorse belongs to the sensibility; but none the less does it give admonitory warning. Its voice must be accounted as the voice of God in the human soul. He who made that sensibility so that it will sometimes recoil under a sense of guilt, and turn back to consume the life and joy of the soul, did not make it a lie. It is strange that any should suppose this remorse to be itself the punishment threatened of God against sin, and the whole of it. Far from it. This is not that punishment which God has threatened; it is only a premonition of it.

The very fears men feel are often to be taken as an indication that the thing they dread is a reality. Why is it that men in their sins are so often greatly afraid to die? It is no other than a trumpet-tone of the voice of God, sounding up from the depths of their very nature. How can they overlook the fact that these grim forebodings of coming doom are indeed a revelation of wrath, made in the very nature God has given them!

Another revelation of God's wrath he makes in his juridical abandonment of sinners. God manifests his despair of doing anything more for their salvation when he manifestly withdraws his Spirit and gives them over to hopeless abandonment. Withdrawing his Spirit, he leaves them in great moral blindness. They may have been able to see and to discriminate spiritual things somewhat before, but, after God forsakes them, they seem almost utterly void of this power. Everything is dark; all is confused. The light of the Holy Spirit being withdrawn, it were practically vain for the sinner himself, or for his sympathising friends, to expect his salvation. This mental darkness over all spiritual things is God's curse on his rejection of truth, and significantly forebodes his speedy doom.

Analogous to this is the indication given in a moral paralysis of the conscience. Strangely it seems to have lost its sensibility; its ready tact in moral discrimination is gone; its perceptions seem unaccountably obtuse, and the tone of its voice waxes feeble and almost inaudible. Practically, one might almost as well have no conscience at all.

What does this paralysis of conscience indicate? Plainly, that God has abandoned that soul. The conscience, so long overborne by a perverse will, gives way, and God ceases longer to sustain its vitality.

It is painful to see how persons in this condition strain their endeavours, but such debility comes down upon them -- they become so indifferent; diverting influences are so potent -- they drop their endeavours, powerless. Once their conscience had some activity; truth fell on their mind with appreciable force, and they were aware of resisting it; but, by-and-by, there ensued a state of moral feeling in which the mind is no longer conscious of refusing; indeed, it seems scarcely conscious of anything whatever. He has restrained the influence of truth until conscience has mainly suspended its functions. Like the drunkard, who has lost all perception of the moral wrong of intemperance, and who has brought this insensibility on himself by incessant violations of his better judgment, so the sinner has refused to hear the truth, until the truth now refuses to move him. What is the meaning of this strange phenomenon? It is one of the ways in which God reveals his indignation at man's great wickedness.

An ungodly student, put on the intellectual racecourse alongside of his class-mates, soon becomes ambitious

and jealous. At first, he will probably have some sense of this sin; but he soon loses this sense, and passes on as if unconscious of any sin. What is this but a revelation of God's displeasure?

Again, this wrath against those who hold back the truth in unrighteousness is abundantly revealed in God's word. Think of what Christ said to the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, "Fill ye up, then, the measure of your fathers." What did he mean by that? Their fathers had filled their cup of sin till God could bear with them no longer, and then he filled up his cup of wrath and poured it forth on the nation, and "there was no remedy." So Christ intimates it shall be with the scribes and Pharisees. And what is this but to reveal his wrath against them for holding back the truth through unrighteousness?

Again, he lets such sinners die in their sins. Observe how, step by step, God gave them one revelation after another of his wrath against their sin; remorse, moral blindness, decay of moral sensibility, and the plain assertions of his word. All these failing, he gives them up to some strong delusion, that they may believe a lie. God himself says, "For this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie, that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness." It is painfully instructive to study the workings of modern delusions, especially spiritualism; to notice how it has come in following the track of those great revivals that blessed our country a few years since. Do not I know scores of persons who passed through those revivals unblessed, and now they are mad with this delusion? They saw the glory of God in those scenes of revival power; but they turned away, and now they are mad on their idols, and crazy under their delusions. God has given them up to die in their sins, and it will be an awful death! Draw near them gently, and ask a few kind questions; you will soon see that they make no just moral discriminations. All is dark which needs to be light, ere they can find the gate of life.

REMARKS.

1. You may notice the exact difference between saints and sinners, including among sinners all professors of religion who are not in an obedient state of mind. The exact difference is this, saints have adopted God's will as their law of activity, the rule that shall govern all their life and all their heart. You reveal to them God's will; this settles all further controversy. The very opposite of this is true of the sinner. With him, the fact of God's supposed will has no such influence at all; usually no influence of any sort, unless it be to excite his opposition. Again, the Christian, instead of restraining the influence of truth, acts up to his convictions. If the question of oughtness is settled, all is settled. Suppose I go to Deacon A. or Deacon B. and I say, "I want you to do a certain thing; I think you must give so much of your money to this object." He replies, "I don't know about that, my money costs me great labour and pains." But I resume, and say, "Let us look calmly at this question;" and then I proceed to show him that the thing I ask of him is, beyond a doubt, his duty to God and to man. He interposes at once," You need not say another word; that is enough. If it is my duty to Christ and to his people, I ask no more." But the sinner is not moved so. He knows his duty beforehand, but he has long been regardless of its claims on him. You must appeal to his selfish interests, if you would reach his heart. With the Christian, you need not appeal to his hopes or his fears. You only need show his duty to God. The sinner you can hope to move only by appeals to his interests. The reason of this is that his adopted course of life is to serve his own interests, nothing higher.

2. With sinners the question of religion is one of loss and gain. But with Christians, it is only a question of right and duty towards God. This makes truth to him all important, and duty imperative. But the sinner only asks, What shall I gain? or What shall I lose? It is wholly a question of danger. Indeed, so true is this, that ministers often assume that the only availing motive with a sinner must be an appeal to his hopes and fears. They have mostly dropped out the consideration of right as between the sinner and God. They seem to have forgotten that so far forth as they stop short of the idea of right, and appeal only to the sinner's selfishness, their influence tends to makes spurious converts. For if men enter upon the Christian life only for gain in the line of their hopes and fears, you must keep up the influence of these considerations, and must expect to work upon these only; that is, you must expect to have selfish Christians and a selfish church. If you say to them, "This is duty," they will reply, "What have we ever cared for duty? We were never converted to the doctrine of doing our duty. We became Christians at all, only for the sake of promoting our own interests, and we have nothing to do in the Christian life on any other motive."

Now observe, they may modify this language a little if it seems too repugnant to the general convictions of decent people; but none the less is this their real meaning? They modify its language only on the same general principle of making everything subservient to self.

3. Again, we see how great a mistake is made by those selfish Christians who say, "Am I not honest towards my fellowmen? And is not this a proof of piety?"

What do you mean by "honest"? Are you really honest towards God? Do you regard God's rights as much as you wish him to regard yours? But perhaps you ask as many do, What is my crime? I answer, Is it not enough for you to do nothing, really nothing, towards obedience to God? Is it not something serious that you refuse to do God's will and hold back the claims of his truth? What's the use of talking about your morality, while you disregard the greatest of all moral claims and obligations -- those that bind you to love and obey God? What can it avail you to say perpetually, Am I not moral and decent towards men?

Why is God not satisfied with this?

4. Ye who think you are almost as good as Christians; in fact, it is much nearer the truth to say that you are almost as bad as devils! Indeed you are fully as bad, save that you do not know as much, and therefore cannot be so wicked. You say, "We are kind to each other." So are devils. Their common purpose to war against God compels them to act in concert. They went in concert into the man possessed with a legion of devils, as we learn in the gospel history. Very likely they are as kind toward each other, in their league against God and goodness, as you are towards your neighbours. So that selfish men have small ground to compliment themselves on being kind and good to each other, while they withstand God, since, in both these respects, they are only like devils in hell.

5. And now, my impenitent hearers -- what do you say? Putting your conduct towards God into plain language, it would run thus: "Thou, Lord, callest on me to repent; I shall refuse. Thou dost strive to enforce my obligation to repent by various truths; I hold back those truths from their legitimate influence on my mind. Thou dost insist on my submission to thy authority; I shall do no such thing."

This, you will see, is only translating your current life and bearing towards God into plain words. If you were really to lift your face toward heaven and utter these words, it would be blasphemy. What do you think of it now? Do you not admit, and often assert, that actions speak louder than words? Do they not also speak more truthfully?

6. To those of you who are business men, let me make this appeal. What would you think of men who should treat you as you treat God? You take your account to your customer and you say to him, This account, sir, has been lying a long time past due; will you be so good as to settle it? You cannot deny that it is a fair account of value received, and I understand you have abundant means to pay it. He very coldly refuses. You suggest the propriety of his giving some reasons for this refusal; and he tells you it is a fine time to get large interest on his money, and he therefore finds it more profitable to loan it out than to pay his debts. That is all. He is only selfish; all there is of it is simply this, that he cares for his own interests supremely, and cares little or nothing for yours when the two classes of interests -- his and yours -- come into competition.

When you shall treat God as well as you want your creditors to treat you, then you may hold up your head as, so far, an honest man; but, so long as you do the very thing towards God which you condemn as infinitely mean from your fellowmen towards yourself, you have little ground for self-complacent pride.

All this would be true and forcible, even if God were no greater, no better, and had no higher and no more sacred rights than your own. How much more, then, are they weighty beyond expression, since God is so much greater, better, and holier than mortals!