

What Saith the Scripture?

<http://www.WhatSaithTheScripture.com/>

Dominion Over Sin

Originally untitled. Title supplied by WStS.

by Charles Grandison Finney
President of Oberlin College

from "The Oberlin Evangelist" Publication of Oberlin College

Lecture IX
April 24, 1839

Public Domain Text
Reformatted by Katie Stewart

Text.--Romans 6:14: "For sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the law, but under grace."

I shall attempt to show,

I. What sin is.

II. When it may be said, that sin has dominion in the soul.

III. What it is to be under the law.

IV. What it is to be under grace.

V. That under the law, sin will have dominion over an unsanctified mind, of course.

VI. That sin cannot have dominion over those who are under grace.

I. I am to show, what sin is.

Sin is a state of mind, which is the opposite of the law of God. As I have shown, in a former lecture, the whole of true religion consists in obedience to this law, which requires supreme disinterested love to God, and disinterested and equal love to our neighbor. This is the opposite of selfishness or a supreme regard to our own interest. Selfishness therefore, under all its forms, is sin, and there is no form of sin, that is not some modification of selfishness.

Sin then is not any part of our physical or mental constitution--it is no part or principle of nature itself; but a voluntary state of mind, (i.e.) an action, or choice of the mind--a preferring our own interest, because it is our own, to other and higher interests. It does not consist in any defect of our nature; but

in a perversion, or prohibited use of our nature.

II. I am to show, when sin has dominion in the soul.

It cannot be properly said, that sin has dominion, because the soul has fallen under the power of an occasional temptation.

Some have supposed this passage to teach, that a person, under grace, could not sin under any circumstances. They have maintained, that to sin once, is to be brought under the dominion of sin.

Now although I am for making the promises mean all they say, yet I do not believe that such language as this can be justly interpreted to mean all that such persons contend for; (e.g.) if a man should be once intoxicated, under circumstances of peculiar temptation, it would be neither fair, nor true, in speaking of his general character, to say that he was under the dominion of the ardent spirits, and a slave to his appetite.

As an illustration of my meaning, take a parallel promise, John 4:14. Christ says, "But whosoever drinketh the water, that I shall give him, shall never thirst; but the water, that I shall give him, shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." Now some have understood this promise to mean, that if a person became a partaker of the Holy Ghost, he could never again know what it was to thirst for the divine influence, in any sense--that he would have such a fullness of the Spirit of God, as to have at no time any thirsting for more. But this is certainly a forced construction of this passage. It is not in accordance with what we should mean, in the use of similar language. Should you promise your neighbor, if he came and boarded with you, he should never hunger nor thirst, would he understand you to mean, that he should never have a good appetite for his food; or merely that he should not be hungry, or thirst, without being supplied? He would doubtless understand you, and you would expect him to understand you, to promise, that he should have enough to eat, and to drink--that he should not suffer the gnawings of hunger, or the pains of thirst, without the supply that nature demands.

Just so I understand this promise of Christ, that if any man has partaken of these waters of life, he has the pledge of Christ, that he shall have as great a measure of His Spirit, as his necessities demand--that whenever his soul thirsts for more of the waters of life, he has a right to plead this promise, with an assurance that Christ will satisfy his thirsty soul, with living waters.

I suppose this text to have a similar meaning. It does not mean, that no person, under temptation, can fall under the power of an occasional sin; but that no form of sin shall be habitual--that no form of selfishness, or lust, shall in any such case, be habitual, in the soul, that is under grace--that no appetite, or passion, or temptation of any kind, should in this sense be able to bring the soul into bondage to sin.

III. I am to show, what it is to be under the law.

- 1. To be under the law, is to be subject to the law, as a covenant of works. In other words, to be under the necessity of perfectly fulfilling the law, in order to obtain salvation thereby.

- 2. To be under the law, is to be influenced by legal motives, or considerations --to be constrained by the fear of punishment, or influenced by the hope of reward.
- 3. To be under the law, is to be constrained by conscience, and a sense of duty; and not by love. Individuals seem to go painfully about their duty, under the biddings of conscience; and submit with about as much pain, and reluctance, as a slave to his master.
- 4. To be under the condemning sentence of the law, like a state criminal, and of course shut out from communion with God. A state criminal, under sentence, is of course shut out from all friendly intercourse with the government--is considered, and treated as an outlaw. Just so with a sinner, under the sentence of God's law. While he remains in a state of spiritual death, and alienation from God, the sentence of eternal death is out against him--he is shut out from communion with God, and consequently sin will have dominion over him.

IV. I am to show, what it is to be under grace.

- 1. To be under a covenant of grace, in opposition to a covenant of law. By a covenant of grace, I mean the covenant which confers all the blessings of salvation, as a mere gratuity; and more than a gratuity, as being the direct opposite of our deserts.
- 2. To be influenced by love, excited by grace, and not by legal motives.
- 3. To be put in possession of the blessings of the new, or gracious covenant, Jer. 31:31-34; "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; (which My covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord;) but this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: after those days, saith the Lord, I will but My law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and will remember their sin no more." Heb. 8:8-12; "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I make with their fathers, in the day when I took them by the hand, to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in My covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord: I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts; and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to Me a people: and they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more."
- 4. To be under grace, is to be so united to Christ, by faith, as to receive a continual life, and influence from Him. He represents Himself, as a vine; and His children as the branches. And to be under grace, is to be united to Him, as a branch is united to the vine--so as to receive our continual support, and strength, and nourishment, and life from Him.

To be under grace, is to pass from death unto life--to be translated from the kingdom of darkness, into the kingdom of God's dear Son--to pass from the state of a condemned criminal, into a state of redemption, justification and adoption.

V. I am to show, that under the law, sin will have dominion over an unsanctified mind.

- 1. Because this is the certain effect of law upon a selfish mind. A selfish mind is seeking its own interests of course. And if it attempts to obey the law, it will be through selfish considerations--either through hope or fear. But in every such attempt, the mind must fail of course; for selfishness is the very thing which the law prohibits. And every attempt to obey from selfish motives, is only a grievous breach of the law. Therefore, if all former sins were canceled, and salvation depended upon future obedience to the law, salvation would in this way be forever impossible. Hence, if the mind attempted to obey for the sake of obtaining salvation, this would be selfishness, and disobedience; and in every such attempt, the mind must fail of course.
- 2. Sin must have dominion over a selfish mind, that is under law, or it would amount to this absurdity, that the disinterested love demanded by the law, would flow from selfish motives--a thing naturally impossible.
- 3. To produce disinterested love, salvation must be gratuitous, (i.e.) the soul must understand, that obedience to law, is not the condition to salvation; for if it understood legal obedience to be the condition of salvation, it is impossible that this consideration should not influence a selfish mind, in its efforts to obey. So that this consideration would render all attempts at obedience ineffectual; and sin would continue to have dominion.
- 4. Selfishness will of course seek present and selfish gratification, until compelled, by deep conviction to desist. In which case, the will certainly takes refuge in a self-righteous attempt to obey the law, unless it understands that salvation is gratuitous, or a matter of grace. There seems to be, as a matter of fact, no other way in which the power of selfishness can be broken, except to annihilate the reasons for selfish efforts, by bringing home to the soul the truth, that salvation is by grace, through faith.

The effect of law upon a selfish mind, is beautifully illustrated by the Apostle, in the 7th chapter of Romans. The case there supposed is what the Apostle, as is common with him, represents as if it were his own experience. It appears, from its connection, to illustrate the influence of law over an unsanctified mind. It is plainly a case where sin was habitual --where it had dominion -- where the law of sin and death in the members so warred against the law of the mind, as to bring the soul into captivity. Now some have contended, and continue to contend, that the Apostle, in this chapter, describes the experience of a saint under grace. But this cannot be; because, in this case, it would flatly contradict the text upon which I am preaching. As I have said, the case described in the seventh of Romans, is a case in which sin undeniably has dominion, the very thing of which the Apostle complains. But the text affirms, that sin shall not have dominion over the soul, that is under grace. Besides, it is very plain, that in the seventh of Romans it was the influence of law, and not of grace, which the Apostle was discussing.

- 5. Another reason, why sin will have dominion under the law is, that under law men are left to unaided exercise of their own powers of moral agency without those gracious helps, which alone can induce true holiness. The law throws out its claims upon them, and requires the perfect use, and entire consecration of all their powers, to the service of God, and then leaves them to obey, or disobey at their peril. It neither secures, nor promises to them any aid; but requires them to go forth to the service of God--to love Him with all their heart, and their neighbor as themselves, on pain of death. Now in such circumstances, it is very plain, that a mind already selfish, will only be confirmed in selfishness, under such a dispensation.

VI. I am to show, that sin cannot have dominion over those, who are under grace.

- 1. Because the law is written in the heart, (i.e.) the spirit of the law has taken possession of the soul, and made us forever "free from the law of sin and death," which was in our members.
- 2. Because the soul has become acquainted with God, and with Christ, and has fallen deeply in love with their character. It delights in God, and exercises the very temper required by the law, uninfluenced by the hope of its rewards, or by the fear of its penalty. It is overcome and swallowed up with that love, that naturally results from a right acquaintance with God. Now in this state of mind, sin can no more have dominion over the soul--no form of selfishness can be habitual, any more than a wife, who loves her husband supremely, can become a habitual adulteress. A woman who loves her husband, might, by force of circumstances, and by some unexpected and powerful temptation, be led to sin against her husband; but for this to become habitual, while the supreme love of her husband continues, is a contradiction.
- 3. Sin cannot have dominion over the soul, because Christ has become its life. He is represented not only as the life of the soul, but as the head of the Church, and Christians as members of His body, and flesh, and bones. Now as the vine supplies the branch, and as the head controls the members, so Christ has become the main-spring--the well spring of life, in the soul; and sin cannot have dominion over such a soul, unless it can have dominion over Christ. Christ may find it necessary to permit the soul to fall into an occasional sin, to teach it by experience what perhaps it will not learn in any other way. But that sin, under any form, should become habitual, cannot be necessary to give the soul a sense of its dependence; and Christ, by express promise, has secured the soul against it.
- 4. Because the soul so reposes in the blood of Christ for justification, and salvation, as to have no motive to selfish efforts, being released from the responsibility of working out a legal righteousness. It is constrained by such a sense of abundant and overflowing grace, that it loves and serves God, having no reason to serve itself.
- 5. Because it is so constrained by a sense of the love of Christ, as to be as unable to indulge in sin, and vastly more so, than the most dutiful and affectionate child is to indulge in habitual and willful disobedience to its parents.
- 6. It is impossible for sin to have dominion over a Christian, because it implies a contradiction. To be a Christian, is habitually to love, and serve, and honor God. Obedience is the rule, and sin is the exception. It is therefore impossible that sin should have dominion over a Christian, for

this would be the same as to say, that a person might be a Christian while sin was his rule, and obedience the exception; or, in other words, that sin is habitual, and obedience only occasional. If this is the definition of a Christian, then I know not what a Christian is.

- 7. Sin cannot have dominion, because the veracity of the God of truth is pledged, that it shall not.
- 8. Because the very terms of the covenant of grace show, that to be under grace, is to have the law written in the heart--to be made or rendered obedient to God, by the residence of the Spirit of Christ within us.
- 9. Because every form of sin is hateful to the soul, and can have no influence, only during a moment of strong temptation--when the involuntary powers, or emotions, are so strongly excited by temptation, as to gain a momentary ascendancy over the will; while the deep preference of the mind, although for the time being comparatively inefficient, yet remains unchanged.
- 10. Because the soul, under grace, is led by the Spirit, to such an understanding and use of its powers, as to make the soul a partaker of the Divine nature. John says, a man "born of God, doth not commit sin; for His seed remaineth in him" (i.e.) the Spirit of Christ dwelling in him, renders it unnatural for him to sin.
- 11. Because old things are passed away, and all things are become new. The grand leading design of the mind has undergone a radical change. And as the leading design of the mind must of course control the habitual conduct of the soul; and as deviations from its influence will only be occasional, and not habitual, so the soul under grace will not, cannot, be under the dominion of sin.

REMARKS.

1. There is no sound religion where there is not universal reformation. It should be constantly and strictly observed, in all cases of professed conversion, whether the reformation in habits and life is universal --whether it extends to selfishness, and sinful lusts, and habits of every kind, and under every form. If any lust is spared--if selfishness, under any form, is indulged, and habitual--if any sinful habit still remains unbroken and unsubdued--that is not a sound conversion. No form of sin will have dominion, where conversion is real. Occasional sin may occur through the force of powerful temptation; but no form of sin will be indulged.

2. Want of attention to this truth, has suffered a great many unconverted persons to enter the Church. In some respects, a reformation has been apparent. In such cases, without sufficient discrimination, hope has been indulged by the individual himself, and encouraged by members of the Church--and he has been admitted to the communion, to the great disgrace of religion. It does not appear to me, to have been sufficiently understood, that grace not only ought, but actually does, in every case where piety is real, so overcome sin as to leave no form of it habitual. It has indeed been a common maxim, that where sin is habitual, there is no real religion. But this has manifestly not been adopted in practice; for great multitudes have been admitted, and are still permitted to continue as members, in

good standing in Christian Churches, who habitually indulge in many forms of sin. I think the gospel demands, that no professed convert should be thus encouraged to hope, or suffered to become a member of the Church, whose reformation of life and habits is not universal.

3. You see, that all those persons who have frequent convictions, and conflicts with sin, and yet are habitually overcome by it, are still under the law, and not under grace; (i.e.) they are convicted, but not converted. The difficulty is, their hearts are not changed so as to hate sin under every form. Temptation is too strong, therefore, for their conscience, and for all their resolutions. Their hearts pleading for indulgence will of course render them an easy prey to temptation. This seems to have been exactly the case described in the seventh chapter of Romans, to which I have referred. Where regeneration has taken place--and the heart, as well as the conscience has become opposed to sin--in every such case, the power of temptation is, of course, so broken as that sin will, at most, be only occasional, and never habitual. In all cases, therefore, where individuals find themselves to be, or are seen by others to be under the dominion of sin, or lust, of any kind, they should know, or be told at once, that they have not been regenerated--that they are under the law, and not under grace.

4. What can those persons think of themselves, who know, that they are under the dominion of selfishness, in some of its forms? Do they believe this text to be a direct, and palpable falsehood? If not, how can they indulge the hope, that they are Christians? This text asserts, as plainly as it can, that they are under the law, and not under grace.

5. You see the state of those who are encouraged by the seventh chapter of Romans, supposing that to be a Christian's experience. If they have gone no farther than that, they are still under the law. I have been amazed to see how pertinaciously professors of religion will cling to a legal experience, and justify themselves in it, by a reference to this chapter. I am fully convinced, that the modern construction of the chapter--from the 14th to the 25th verses--interpreting it as a Christian experience, has done incalculable evil; and has led thousands of souls there to rest, and go no farther, imagining that they are already as deeply versed in Christian experience as Paul was, when he wrote that epistle. And there they have stayed, and hugged their delusion, till they have found themselves in the depths of hell.

6. There may be much legal reformation, without any true religion.

7. A legal reformation, however, may generally be distinguished, by some of the following marks:

(1.) It may be only partial; (i.e.) extend to certain forms of sin, while others are indulged.

(2.) It may, and almost certainly will be temporary.

(3.) In a legal experience, it will also generally be manifest, that some forms of sinful indulgence are practiced and defended, as not being sin. And where there has not been a powerful conviction, that has deterred the soul from indulgence, selfishness and lust are still tolerated.

A gospel, or gracious experience will manifest itself in a universal hatred of sin and lust, in every form. And, as I have said, sin will have no place, except in cases of such powerful temptation, as to

carry the will for the time, by the force of excited feelings, when a reaction will immediately take place, and the soul be prostrate in the depths of repentance.

8. By reference to this text, and the principles here inculcated, not only may the genuineness of each pretended conversion, be decided; but also the genuineness, or spuriousness of religious excitements. That is not a revival of true religion, but falls entirely short of it, that does not produce universal reformation of habits in the subjects of it. There is many a revival of conviction, and convictions are often deep, and very general in a community, where, for want of sufficient discriminating instruction, there are very few conversions.

9. You see the mistake of those sinners who fear to embrace religion, lest they should disgrace it, by living in sin, as they see many professing Christians now do.

Sinner, you need not stand back on this account. Only come out from under the law, and be truly converted--submit yourself to the power and influence of sovereign grace, and no form of sin shall have dominion over you, as God is true.

10. This text is a great encouragement to real Christians. They often tremble when they have once fallen under the power of temptation. They greatly fear that sin will gain an entire ascendancy over them.

Christian, lift up your head, and proclaim yourself free. The God of truth has declared that you are not, and shall not be a slave to sin.

11. This is a proper promise, and an important one, for Christians to plead in prayer. It is like a sheet anchor, in a storm. If temptations beat like a tempest upon the soul, let the Christian hold on to this promise with all his heart. Let him cry out, O Lord, perform the good word of Thy grace unto Thy servant, wherein Thou hast caused me to hope, that sin shall not have dominion over me, because I am not under law but under grace.

12. Let those who are under the law--over whom sin, in any form, has dominion--remember, that under the law, there is no salvation--that "whatever things the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law"--and that "cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them."

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)*.