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License, Bondage and Liberty

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Text.--Rom. 8:15: "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father."

In a sermon preached recently, I said that the Lord had three classes of servants; bondmen, mercenaries and those who serve Him in love. I wish now to make another three-fold distinction. Persons may be classified according to their spirit. Some have a spirit of license; others a spirit of bondage; and others a spirit of true Christian liberty. Into one or the other of these classes, all moral agents who have any knowledge of God must necessarily fall. It will be my present object to develop the prominent characteristics of each several class.

I. The spirit of license.

II. Some detail of those who have the spirit of bondage.

III. To consider the case of those who have the spirit of liberty.

I. The first class have what I call the spirit of license.

License differs essentially from liberty. License is selfishness unrestrained by moral considerations--a state in which men do as they list, with no fear of God before their eyes, and follow out their own selfish ends without moral restraint.

Its characteristics are,

- 1. An undeveloped conscience. They have had so little moral training that their views on moral questions are yet immature, or merely negative, and not infrequently erroneous. To this class I once belonged. Many things which I have since regarded as gross sins, gave me then no trouble. My conscience was undeveloped. Nothing had then transpired to develop it. Some of my earliest impressions of moral restraint were produced by seeing my mother weep because my

father would let his sons go to the lake fishing on the Sabbath. Her tears reminded me forcibly that there was something wrong in this. I was then old enough to know all about such matters of duty, but not having my attention turned to these subjects, I remained practically as if I had no conscience.

- 2. Others have only a seared conscience. These go on much as if they had no conscience at all, although they may have had a conscience very considerably developed. They can recollect when they could not lie or swear. Tempted, they were often obliged to refrain by the demands of conscience. Now they are inclined perhaps to smile over their former notions.
- 3. Others are not restrained, although ever so much upbraided. They have no faith in the great things revealed of God. Indeed they act as if there were no God, for although they admit His existence, they allow it to have no practical influence on their minds. They have no practical regard for what is morally right. Having no vivid sense of moral obligation, their minds are wholly open to the impulses of selfishness. If they forbear to cheat, lie, or steal, it is not through any moral consideration, but under the influence of some form of selfishness. They manifest the spirit of license in this particular, that conscience has no practical control over them. The desire to do good has no influence. They do not care to do any good, although they know they have the power and the opportunity.

Here let me stop and ask, how it is with you in this respect? What testimony do your heart and life bear when tried by such tests as these? Are you living as you know you ought not to live? Are you doing what your conscience condemns? Are you going on in your own way, despite of all God may require, under a spirit of moral recklessness? Let this matter be inquired into. You may not be reckless as to other considerations; but if you are so as to moral considerations, the fact ought to alarm you. If the motives which ought to control you fail of doing so, your heart must be fearfully wrong. If your condition is such that others, in order to influence you, must appeal to something besides conscience, and the sense of duty, you may know that you are far gone in moral recklessness and ruin.

- 4. It is curious to see how this downward tendency acts on the moral nature. The perception of moral principles grows dim; moral relations seem to fade away gradually from the mind. The man will tell you he doubts whether such and such things are sinful at all. He does not quite see how there need be any wrong in them. If you try to point out to him their moral qualities and relations, you are amazed to find, that his perceptions on such questions are so dull that you cannot make him see a sin. This is naturally the state of all those who have the spirit of license, for if persons have clear, sharp moral perceptions, they will fall into one of the two later classes. The men of license you will find have but few moral principles. Singularly, you will see that these principles have dropped out of their mind, until there is little of that sort left. They can now laugh over the commission of sins which once made them sweat with agony. All moral principles become lax in their minds. Things once deemed wrong they learn to excuse; look back on their former scruples as superstitious and foolish; and talk largely of their "progress"--little thing, alas, that their way of progress is towards hell.
- 5. Persons in youth, having the spirit of license, will manifest in it their pleasure loving tendencies, and in their passion for dress. Amusement is often their chief delight, and of course

their spirit of license develops itself in this direction. What, they say, were we not made that we might enjoy ourselves? Does not God like to see us happy? But if you search carefully into their state of mind you will see that they are "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God;" that they care little as to what will please God, but much for what will please themselves. They know how to excuse anything which it pleases them to do.

- 6. Developments of the same reckless spirit vary according to age and tastes. As the young are pleasure-loving, the middle-aged are covetous and money-loving; or perhaps they aspire after distinction in their professions. Whither the heart goes, in that direction, you will find the spirit of license in sin developing itself. Under such a state of moral feeling, men will be sure to leave a broad margin for deviations from moral right. They can justify a great many dishonest ways of getting gain; or of promoting their favorite schemes of ambition.

It is striking and sad to see how their worldly-mindedness can deface and even efface all their notions of right and of wrong; how they will plead for sin; defend various forms of sin and indulgence; roll their sin as a sweet morsel under the tongue--unscrupulously violate the Sabbath--allow themselves almost any amount of latitude in their direction, especially if among strangers; take a little strong drink and say--What's the harm if nobody knows it and it brings no disgrace? In business, what will they not do if they can escape detection? If there is danger of detection, they will call it a mistake and rectify it,--a thing they never do for the sake of the moral principle. In political life, they manage any way to subserve their ends, their object being, never the general good, but always their own personal interests. In whatever form of self-seeking, they care not for the eye of God, nor for the dictates of conscience.

- 7. The law of progress with all men of this class is from bad to worse. If you notice where they started and trace along their secret history, you will see this distinctly and fearfully illustrated. You, young men, who yield yourselves to sin, do you not see that your law of progress is from bad to worse? And you, young women, if you give yourselves up to license in sin?

Some of you have been almost surfeited with religious instruction. You have heard prayers enough and have seen tears enough to melt any heart but yours. Where will you be when once removed forever from these restraints and given up to the full sweep of that fearful law of downward progress?

For those whose conscience has been rightly developed, I have great hope. How many have we seen here who, when they first came among us, had hardly conscience enough to make them appear decent in the house of God; but not having been hardened, they began to listen, and as they listened began to feel and think. Soon you meet them in the enquiry meeting; and then soon, at the feet of Jesus.

On the other hand, some go the other way. Already hardened fearfully, they wince under the truth; their hearts rebel against it; they fall into some low form of skepticism--cast off God and His truth, and with fearful strides rush downward, downward, to the depths of hell!

Where, young men, are you? And ye of every age and of all conditions, professing or not professing piety, let me ask you to apply these tests to your own heart and life. Where are you? Have you the spirit of license? and more than all, let me ask, Have you that most fearful of all symptoms of being far gone in the way of death,--that, knowing your state to be as bad as it can be, yet you do not care?

II. I must next speak with some detail of those who have the spirit of bondage.

- 1. Very commonly, yet improperly, those who have this spirit are called conscientious Christians. They get this name especially because they differ so widely from those who have the spirit of license. It is true, this class differs very much from that. Their conscience is not seared, but tender; is not undeveloped or inactive, but wakeful and efficient in certain directions. Yet they are not properly conscientious, because they do not go deep enough. Their conscience reaches only to the exterior of life--not to the interior. It restrains them from external conduct which they deem wrong, but does not control the heart. It is a conscience, without either faith or love. Hence their life is not spontaneously after the will of God. They are in bondage in the sense that they are not at liberty to do what they would like. Since their heart does not sympathize with God, all His ways are irksome and all their own ways, pleasant; so that of course all their religious duties must come hard. Now if their hearts were truly given to God, they would be filled with the Spirit, and nothing could so please them as the things that please God. In such a state, they can serve God without bondage,

"Tis love that makes our cheerful feet,

In swift obedience move--"

and this obedience is the highest freedom and the purest blessedness. When the heart is right it asks nothing wrong, and men have only to go according to their heart; or more strictly, they have only to follow the Lord, and to this the heart makes no resistance but yields with the utmost delight.

- 2. But those whose hearts are yet in sin, yet who do a bond-service--for God as they suppose, but really for self; they would fain lessen their religious services if they might. They would stay away from religious meetings if it would do. They lust for the fleshpots of Egypt, and would return thither if they dared. They are in bondage to their consciences. For the sake of peace with conscience, they conform to its dictates in part, in the way of compromise, pleading to be let off as much as possible, and making the best turns they can, as men are wont to do with a hard master.

Again, this class are in bondage to God, serving Him, so far as they render Him any service, in the spirit of slaves, not of sons. They think they must be religious, or do worse, and they are afraid of the worse alternative. They would do many things which God forbids, but they dare not. Hence they submit, yet the heart yields only the form of service.

- 3. They are in bondage to the church. They are afraid of censure. To have Christians watch over them is about equivalent to having spies environing their path. So far from rejoicing to have the

kind and watchful eye of brethren and sisters on them, they feel this to be an unwelcome restraint.

Now, beloved, how does this test apply to your heart?

- 4. This class abound in resolutions. These constitute their principal Christian exercises. To make resolutions and to break them; to endeavor, yet to fail to perform; to resolve and resolve, yet go on as ever--this is their religious history. The reason is, they never break up the deep foundations of selfishness and let their souls settle down into the great depths of benevolence.
- 5. They are often greatly pressed with conviction, a deep sense of sin troubles them; conscience upbraids; they say, or omit to say many things for which they condemn themselves, and hence they feel exceedingly uneasy. If they are students they scarcely get a lesson. In fact they are simply convicted sinners, not converted saints.

Again, their knowledge of their own case controls the judgment they form of others, and hence they judge others harshly. They cannot conceive how a Christian can smile without sin. They do not understand that buoyancy of spirit which is so congenial to the peaceful Christian. Always dissatisfied with themselves, how can they be satisfied with others? Always conscious of doing wrong, how can they, naturally, judge otherwise of their friends? Their own mind screwed up under a feeling of bondage and a sense of constraint, they give no credit for honest piety to those who walk peacefully and calmly in the light of the Savior's presence. Spontaneously forming harsh judgments, first of themselves, and next of others, they have no idea what a change would come over these judgments of others if once they were to come themselves into gospel liberty. Set these bond-servants to the work of Christian discipline; they almost never reclaim or reform the offender. It is quite beyond their power to love him down--for the love is not in them.

Or let another commence discipline in the church; and you will find them almost surely throwing themselves in the way. Their sympathies will be on the side of the wrong-doer. They will treat everything as persecution which is intended to reform and subdue.

- 6. Commonly they are strict and punctual in their religious duties, yet not willingly and joyfully, but of constraint. Take the constraint away, and no such duties would be done.
- 7. In these religious duties, they get no real comfort. The true child of God gets real comfort without seeking it; this class seek it much and long, but in vain. They value it highly; want somebody to give them comfort, applaud the ministers who speak comfortably to them; but, not complying with the conditions of comfort, they must fail to find it.
- 8. They have but little hope, and that unsettled, hard to keep, of little practical worth. Anxious, unhappy, an annoyance to others, they are prone to be sour, morose and censorious. It is natural they should misunderstand those who pass into real peace by submission to God. When they see such persons enter a state of gospel light and liberty, they are alarmed, and say, "How can he be so cheerful? What can make him so light-hearted? There must be something wrong." Now persons under the spirit of bondage have not gone far enough even to see where the peaceful

Christian stands.

- 9. They are also characterized by a religious zeal and a sanctimoniousness which must needs put on something, and which to a discerning eye will have the air of something put on, and not spontaneous. It is not a natural solemnity, but a constrained formality.
- 10. Their prayers amount to this, that they may be converted. They do not so understand it, for they think they have been converted, perhaps long ago; yet their convictions lead them to pray for just what would, if granted, be conversion. The amount of their prayer is that God would give them repentance, a new heart, gospel faith; in short would make them Christians. They struggle earnestly, in their way, but going perpetually about to establish their own righteousness, they come not into gospel rest.
- 11. With them, religion seems a hard business--as it always must seem to be, while the heart is wrong. What, they say, how can a man love God with all his heart? How can one love his neighbor as himself? The best they can do is to struggle on and find no peace. One perpetual round of tasked duty-doing makes up their religion. In it all, there is no real service done for God, from a heart devoted lovingly to His character and service. Such have only the spirit of bondage again to fear.

III. I am next to consider the case of those who have the spirit of liberty.

Some understand Christian liberty to be the privilege of doing as they please, right or wrong: but they greatly mistake; for this is only license.

Liberty, psychologically considered, is the power to do the contrary--the free ability to choose and to act otherwise than the actual choice. But, considered in reference to the Christian life, it may be better defined as the spirit of doing right spontaneously. The heart is united to God by thoroughly choosing His ends, and hence become unified with Him in sympathy and interest, even as the son with the father whom he respects and loves.

The Bible here in our context speaks of Christians as being "sons of God." It represents them as becoming sons both by being begotten of His Spirit in regeneration; and by adoption. Indeed the Spirit of God dwells in them, takes up His abode in their hearts; and hence creates a living union between their souls and His. They come to have the same great reason for action--the same radical purpose and aim,--that God Himself has. They have chosen the same great end, have adopted the same views; submit their heart to the control and guidance of His truth and Spirit; so that genuine benevolence issues from their very hearts, spontaneously. Hence a harmony with God in their ends, aims and affections, becomes an established, settled state; and they are really no more in bondage than Christ Himself was. You need not appeal to their conscience to prick them on to duty. They have a conscience, to be sure; but it is to them a guide, not a goad; a very important distinction. Their conscience is not a goad, under which they move along, stung, wincing, bleeding; but a guide--given of God to lead their way and point out moral relations. When cordially accepted as a guide, it has no sting; it comes not to lacerate, any more than if it were wrapped in the softest silk. As soon as the heart settles and sinks sweetly into the will of God, conscience needs no rod--no scorpion sting--not even a word of command; it has only to say--"This is the way, Here you are to go--this is the will of

your Father in heaven."

Persons not in this state and strangers to it may suppose that your conscience has fallen away and dropt out. It was said of a wife; "She is dutiful, but has no love." But suppose this woman is married to one she tenderly loves, to whom her heart is bound with bonds stronger than death. She might then say--it seems as if I had no conscience. Formerly it was compelled to be a goad, and not merely a guide; but now it has no such work to do as before; the heart needs only to know the way and it rejoices with great joy to walk therein.

This is a spirit of spontaneous co-operation with God. It is love acting itself out and manifesting itself in a way natural and easy. Everything is done as is supposed will please God. The mind acts on high principles; the law of love and of God is written on the heart; all obedience is natural and free because spontaneous and in harmony with the supreme choice. This is the full idea of Christian liberty: acting as we please when our pleasure is to act only right; taking the right course because this pleases God, and nothing can please us but what pleases Him. The mind entrusts all its own interests and destinies with God. To Him is committed the future, otherwise all unknown and untried; to Him the mind commends the present with its toils and interests; and to Him the past in the hope of free forgiveness through a Redeemer. Hence the soul is free and at ease. It is conscientious in the true sense; its state and acts being so entirely in harmony with an enlightened conscience that it comes into no collision with its dictates. All is right, says the conscience; and of course there is peace, so long as religious feeling and duty are spontaneous.

REMARKS.

1. It is hardly necessary to say that the first class which I have described--having the spirit of license--are spiritually blind and dead. This is abundantly obvious. The second class--men in bondage--are regarded as very exemplary Christians, but they are in fact only convicted sinners. That they are not saved is very evident from the fact that they are constantly praying for salvation--that is--when they are stirred up to any religious exercise. You may try to get them to pray and to labor for others; you cannot; they fall right back to praying for themselves. After preaching one evening, I went to the library room of the church, and at the door a young lady met me, and said she wanted to speak with me. She wanted to ask me what she should do to be saved. Her father, long a leading man in the church was by; so, after talking awhile with the daughter, I said--let us pray for this dear child of yours. He seemed as one confounded; I observed his strange appearance, yet thought it best to press on our work; and therefore said: You lead first in prayer for your daughter, and I will follow. He prayed awhile, yet for himself only. He had not the face to say even once--"Lord, have mercy on my daughter." He could only say--"Lord have mercy on me." Not one word could he say for her, though under such circumstances of heart-thrilling interest.

2. It is of no use to try to drive a person out of this rut; they will forever slump back into it. But as soon as they come into the liberty of the gospel, it becomes as natural as their breath to pray for sinners. A forcible illustration of this occurred in a meeting for enquiry in which I had no assistance. I spoke to them a while to try to lead them to Christ, and then proposed to pray. Before I commenced, I said to them--after I close, if any of you want to pray, just open your mouth and your heart freely. After I stopped, one of them began; prayed a minute for himself; seemed really to come in humble

faith to Christ; and then immediately began to pray for the one next to him. When he stopped, this next one began in the same way, first for himself; then coming to Christ, he launched out in most earnest prayer for his next neighbor. So the thing went on for a long time, each praying first for himself, and till his heart committed itself to Jesus; and then pouring out its prayer for sinners. It was a most affecting season, and especially instructive as showing how naturally the heart that has laid itself over upon the arms of the Savior prays for those yet in their sins.

3. Those who are really in bondage often remain so through pride. They are not humble enough to disclose their real state. When a full pouring out of their souls in confession would do them good and would honor the gospel, they refrain, too proud to take their place before God and man as humbled penitents. Especially is the danger extreme when those who have held a prominent position in the church get into bondage. Often such persons never get out. I could tell you of many cases that would surprise you. They are prone to say--If I confess, I shall stumble others. Who will believe I am converted, or will have any confidence in me if I confess the real truth of myself? Hence Satan shuts them in all round about, and few persons of any class are in so great a danger of losing their souls.

4. Persons in bondage often seem to themselves to have a much deeper sense of sin than those who are in gospel liberty. They think so, but they are entirely mistaken. Those who are free in the gospel have altogether the keenest sense of sin. Yet the bones broken under the law are set and healed, and God has caused rejoicing where only pains were before. But if persons from this state were to fall into sin, you would see their conscience wake to a searching and a fearful retribution.

5. Young men who have not associated with Christians who were in gospel liberty and acting under the impulses of love, will almost always have false conceptions of religion. Their idea of it will lack the amenities and the charities of the true gospel life. They do not see how anybody can be in such a state as not to lust after the flesh-pots of selfishness. They have no conception of that state in which the soul rises to a new class of aspirations and sympathies--in which it ascends far above the murky and foul atmosphere of earth, and bathes itself in the love and the light of heaven. They need to come into close communion with Christians who are in this state before they can properly appreciate the idea of religion.

Do you, my hearers, lack this glorious gospel light and liberty? How is it with you today? Those of you who are not professors; what attitude will you take? Is it not time that you should set your face towards your Father's house, saying;--From this day, my whole heart is thine? What do you say to this! Is it not time that you should get out of darkness?

Think of your bondage. Is it not time that you should awake and accept the offered boon of freedom? Jesus Christ has proclaimed you free, if you will; and is it not time that you should accept it? Will you longer remain of choice a slave?

In some of the southern States, the emancipation of a slave is so great a matter that it is done only by means of special forms and by a solemn public transaction. The master brings his slave before the court and there in a special form makes out and subscribes his papers, and thus gives the slave his freedom.

A far more wonderful transaction has taken place in another quarter; a far higher court has been in session; nay, the supreme Executive of the universe has come forth to act on this great emancipation, and has made out true papers for giving gospel liberty to a race of lost, enslaved sinners. Had you heard of this? The thing was done many years ago, but the business still lingers unfinished. In fact there have not been messengers enough to carry the glad news yet to every creature; and what is worse, very many to whom it has come cannot be persuaded to accept the boon. Hence much time has been lost and the work still lingers. And now what will you do with this proposal? It comes to you; what will you do with it? Do you say, "I am not a slave;" ah, but you are, and you know it! Do you say, "If I were only sure that I could get such a religion--one of true gospel liberty--I would have it"? Let me tell you, there is no other true religion, none. All other is counterfeit. You can have this if you will.

Suppose a young man here should say--"If you can tell me what to do, I will do it. Any thing I can do, I am ready to do." This would be hopeful and right; and nothing less than this can be right. How many of you will pledge yourselves to do your duty, if you should be told what it is? If you are willing to do what God requires you to do to be saved even to the cutting off a right hand, then you can be readily directed to Christ and you may surely come and find life and peace. But many sinners come and ask what they shall do, and then, having heard, they refuse to do it. They come to the door and knock; but when bidden to come in, they say--"O no, I had no thought of coming in;" and turn coolly, or it may be, scornfully, away. Alas, "the turning away of the simple shall slay them!" They cannot many times repel the gospel from their hearts and dash salvation's offered cup from their lips, and yet be welcomed in, when they shall have pressing occasion to call in fearful earnest for admission.

GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

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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)*.