

A GUIDE TO

**REPENTANCE**

BY CHARLES G. FINNEY

*SLIGHTLY ADAPTED BY REVIVAL LEGACY*

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*Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD,  
till He comes and rains righteousness upon you.*

- HOSEA 10:12

The Jews were a nation of farmers, and it is therefore a common thing in the Scriptures to refer for illustrations to their occupation, and to the scenes with which farmers and shepherds are familiar. The prophet Hosea addresses them as a nation of backsliders, and reproveth them for their idolatry, and threatens them with the judgments of God.

A revival consists of two parts; as it respects the Church, and as it respects the ungodly. I shall speak on this occasion of a revival in the Church. Fallow ground is ground which has once been tilled, but which now lies waste, and needs to be broken up and mellowed, before it is suited to receive grain.

If you mean to break up the fallow ground of your hearts, you must begin by looking at your hearts--examine and note the state of your minds, and see where you are. Many never seem to think about this. They pay no attention to their own hearts, and never know whether they are doing well in religion or not--whether they are gaining ground or going back--whether they are fruitful, or lying waste like the fallow ground. Now you must draw off your attention from other things, and look into this. Make a business of it. Do not be in a hurry. Examine thoroughly the state of your hearts, and see where you are--whether you are walking with God every day, or walking with the devil--whether you are serving God or serving the devil most--whether you are under the dominion of the prince of darkness, or the Lord Jesus Christ.

Self-examination consists in looking at your lives, in considering your actions, in calling up the past, and learning its true character. Look back over your past history. Take up your individual sins one by one, and look at them. I do not mean that you should just cast a glance at your past life, and see that it has been full of sins, and then go to God and make a sort of general confession, and ask for pardon. That is not the way. You must take them up one by one. It will

be a good thing to take a pen and paper, as you go over them, and write them down as they occur to you.

Go over them as carefully as a merchant goes over his books; and as often as a sin comes before your memory, add it to the list. General confessions of sin will never do. Your sins were committed one by one; and as far as you can come at them, they ought to be reviewed and repented of one by one. Now begin; and take up first what are commonly, but improperly, called...

## SINS OF OMISSION

1. **Ingratitude.** Take this sin, for instance, and write down under it all the instances you can remember, wherein you have received favors from God, for which you have never exercised gratitude. How many cases can you remember? Some remarkable providence, some wonderful turn of events, that saved you from ruin. Set down the instances of God's goodness to you when you were in sin, before your conversion. Then the mercy of God in the circumstances of your conversion, for which you have never been half thankful enough. The numerous mercies you have received since.

How long the catalogue of instances, where your ingratitude is so black that you are forced to hide your face in confusion! Now go on your knees, and confess them one by one to God, and ask forgiveness. The very act of confession, by the laws of suggestion, will bring up others to your memory. Put down these. Go over these three or four times in this way, and you will find an astonishing amount of mercies, for which you have never thanked God.

2. **Want of love to God.** Think how grieved and alarmed you would be, if you discovered any flagging of affection for you in your wife, husband, or children; if you saw somebody else engrossing their hearts, and thoughts, and time. Perhaps, in such a case, you would well nigh die with a just and virtuous jealousy. Now, God calls himself a jealous God; and have you not given your heart to other loves, and infinitely offended him?

3. **Neglect of the Bible.** Put down the cases, when for days, and perhaps for weeks-- it may be, even for months together, you had no pleasure in God's word. Many people read over a whole chapter in such a way, that they could not tell what they have been reading. And do you pay so little regard to it as not to remember what you read? If so, no wonder that your life is spent at random, and that your religion is such a miserable failure.

4. **Unbelief.** Recall the instances in which you have virtually charged the God of truth with lying, by your unbelief of his express promises and declarations. God has promised to give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him. Now, have you believed this? Have you expected him to answer? Have you not virtually said in your hearts, when you prayed for the Holy Spirit, "I do not believe that I shall receive it?" If you have not believed nor expected you should receive the blessing, which God has expressly promised, you have charged him with lying.

5. **Neglect of prayer.** Think of the times when you neglected secret prayer, family prayer, and prayer meetings, or have prayed in such a way as more grievously to offend God, than to have omitted it altogether.

6. **Neglect of the means of grace.** When you have suffered trifling excuses to prevent your attending meetings, have neglected and poured contempt upon the means of salvation, merely from disrelish of spiritual duties.

7. **The manner in which you have performed those duties:** with want of feeling, want of faith, in a worldly frame of mind, so that your words were nothing but a mere chattering of a wretch who did not deserve that God should feel the least care for him. When you have fallen down upon your knees and said your prayers, in such an unfeeling and careless manner that if you had been put under oath five minutes after you left, you could not have told what you had been praying for.

8. **Your want of love for the souls of your fellow-men.** Look around upon your friends and relatives, and remember how little compassion you have felt for them. You have stood by and seen them going right to hell, and it seems as though you did not care if they did. How many days have there been, in which you have failed to make their condition the subject of a single fervent prayer, or even demonstrated an ardent desire for their salvation?

9. **Your want of care for the heathen.** Perhaps you have not cared enough for them to attempt to learn their condition; perhaps not even to take a Missionary magazine. Look at this, and see how much you do really care for the heathen, and set down honestly the real amount of your feelings for them, and your desire for their salvation. Measure your desire for their salvation by the self-denial you practice, in giving of your substance to send them the Gospel. Do you deny yourself even the hurtful superfluities of life, such as tea, coffee, and tobacco? Do you retrench your style of living, and really subject yourself to any inconvenience to save them? Do you daily pray for them in your closet? Are you from month to month laying by something to put into the treasury of the Lord, when you go up to pray? If you are not doing these things, and if

your soul is not agonized for the poor benighted heathen, why are you such a hypocrite as to pretend to be a Christian? Why, your profession is an insult to Jesus Christ!

10. **Your neglect of family duties.** How you have lived before them, how you have prayed, what an example you have set before them. What direct efforts do you habitually make for their spiritual good? What duty have you *not* neglected?

11. **Neglect of social duties.**

12. **Neglect of watchfulness over your own life.** Instances in which you have hurried over your private duties, and not taken yourself to task, nor honestly made up your accounts with God. Where you have entirely neglected to watch your conduct, and have been off your guard, and have sinned before the world, and before the church, and before God.

13. **Neglect to watch over your brethren.** How often have you broken your covenant that you would watch over them in the Lord! How little do you know or care about the state of their souls! And yet you are under a solemn duty to watch over them. What have you done to make yourself acquainted with them? How many of them have you interested yourself for, to know their spiritual state? Go over the list, and wherever you find there has been a neglect, write it down. How many times have you seen your brethren growing cold in religion, and have not spoken to them about it? You have seen them beginning to neglect one duty after another, and you did not reprove them in a brotherly way. You have seen them falling into sin, and you let them go on. And yet you pretend to love them. What a hypocrite! Would you see your wife or child going into disgrace, or falling into the fire, and hold your peace? No, you would not. What do you think of yourself, then, to pretend to love Christians, and to love Christ, while you can see them going into disgrace, and yet say nothing to them?

14. **Neglect of self-denial.** There are many professors who are willing to do almost anything in religion, that does not require self-denial. But when they are called to do anything that requires them to deny themselves – oh, that is too much! They think they are doing a great deal for God, and doing about as much as he ought to ask in reason, if they are only doing what they can do about as well as not; but they are not willing to deny themselves any comfort or convenience whatever, for the sake of serving the Lord. They will not willingly suffer reproach for the name of Christ. Nor will they deny themselves the luxuries of life, to save a world from hell. So far are they from remembering that self-denial is a condition of discipleship, that they do not know what self-denial is. They never have really denied themselves a riband or a pin for Christ, and for the Gospel. Oh, how soon such professors will be in hell! Some are giving of their

abundance, and are giving much, and are ready to complain that others don't give more; when, in truth, they do not give anything that they need, anything that they could enjoy, if they kept it. They only give of their surplus wealth; and perhaps that poor woman, who puts in her mite has exercised more self-denial, than they have in giving thousands.

From these we now turn to...

## **SINS OF COMMISSION**

1. **Worldly mindedness.** What has been the state of your heart in regard to your worldly possessions? Have you looked at them as really yours--as if you had a right to dispose of them as your own, according to your own will? If you have, write that down. If you have loved property, and sought after it for its own sake, or to gratify lust or ambition, or a worldly spirit, or to lay it up for your families, you have sinned, and must repent.

2. **Pride.** Recollect all the instances you can, in which you have detected yourself in the exercise of pride. Vanity is a particular form of pride. How many times have you detected yourself in consulting vanity, about your dress and appearance? How many times have you thought more, and taken more pains, and spent more time about decorating your body to go to church, than you have about preparing your mind for the worship of God? You have gone to the house of God caring more how you appear outwardly in the sight of mortal men, than how your soul appears in the sight of the heart-searching God. You have, in fact, set up yourself to be worshipped by them, rather than prepared to worship God yourself. You sought to divide the worship of God's house, to draw off the attention of God's people to look at your pretty appearance. It is in vain to pretend now, that you don't care anything about having people look at you. Be honest about it. Would you take all this pain about your looks if every person were blind?

3. **Envy.** Look at the cases in which you were envious of those who you thought were above you in any respect. Or perhaps you have envied those who have been more talented or more useful than yourself. Have you not so envied some, that you have been pained to hear them praised? It has been more agreeable to you to dwell upon their faults than upon their virtues, upon their failures than upon their successes. Be honest with yourself, and if you have harbored this spirit of hell, repent deeply before God, or He will never forgive you.

4. **Censoriousness.** Instances in which you have had a bitter spirit, and spoken of Christians in a manner devoid of charity and love--charity, which requires you always to hope the best the case will admit, and to put the best construction upon any ambiguous conduct.

5. **Slander.** The times you have spoken behind people's backs of their faults, real or supposed, of members of the Church or others, unnecessarily, or without good reason. This is slander. You need not lie to be guilty of slander: to tell the truth with the design to injure is slander.

6. **Levity.** How often have you trifled before God, as you would not have dared to trifle in the presence of an earthly sovereign? You have either been an Atheist, and forgotten that there was a God, or have had less respect for him, and his presence, than you would have had for an earthly judge.

7. **Lying.** Understand now what lying is. Any species of designed deception. If the deception is not a design it is not lying. But if you design to make an impression contrary to the naked truth, you lie. Put down all those cases you can recollect. Don't call them by any soft name. God calls them LIES, and charges you with LYING, and you had better charge yourself correctly. How innumerable are the falsehoods perpetrated every day in business, and in social intercourse, by words, and looks, and actions--designed to make an impression on others contrary to the truth for selfish reasons.

8. **Cheating.** Set down all the cases in which you have dealt with an individual, and done to him that which you would not like to have done to you. That is cheating. God has laid down a rule in the case; "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." That is the rule; and now if you have not done so you are a cheat. Mind, the rule is not that you should do what you might reasonably expect them to do to you. That is a rule which would admit of every degree of wickedness. But it is "As ye WOULD they should do to you."

9. **Hypocrisy.** For instance, in your prayers and confessions to God. Set down the instances in which you have prayed for things you did not really want. And the evidence is, that when you were done praying, you could not tell what you had prayed for. How many times have you confessed sins that you did not mean to break off, and when you had no solemn purpose not to repeat them? Yes, have confessed sins when you knew you as much expected to go and repeat them as you expected to live.

10. **Robbing God.** Instances in which you have misspent your time, and squandered hours which God gave you to serve him and save souls, in vain amusements or foolish conversation,

reading novels or doing nothing; cases where you have misapplied your talents and powers of mind; where you have squandered money on your lusts, or spent it for things you did not need, and which neither contributed to your health, comfort or usefulness. Perhaps some of you have laid out God's money for tobacco. I will not speak of intoxicating drink, for I presume there is no professor of religion here that would drink it. I hope there is no one that uses the filthy poison, tobacco. Think of a professor of religion, using God's money to poison himself with tobacco!

11. **Bad temper.** Perhaps you have abused your wife, or your children, or your family, or servants, or neighbors. Write it all down.

12. **Hindering others from being useful.** Perhaps you have weakened their influence by insinuations against them. You have not only robbed God of your own talents, but tied the hands of somebody else. What a wicked servant is he who not only loiters himself, but hinders the rest! This is done sometimes by taking their time needlessly; sometimes by destroying Christian confidence in them. Thus you have played into the hands of Satan, and not only showed yourself an idle vagabond, but prevented others from working.

If you find you have committed a fault against an individual, and that individual is within your reach, go and confess it immediately, and get that out of the way. If the individual you have injured is too far off for you to go and see him, sit down and write him a letter, and confess the injury. If you have defrauded anybody, send the money, the full amount and the interest.

Go thoroughly to work in all this! Go *now*. Don't put it off; that will only make the matter worse. Confess to God those sins that have been committed against God, and to man those sins that have been committed against man. Do not think of getting off by going around the stumbling blocks. Take them up out of the way. In breaking up your fallow ground, you must remove every obstruction. Things may be left that you may think little things, and you may wonder why you do not feel as you wish to in religion, when the reason is that your proud and carnal mind has covered up something which God required you to confess and remove. Break up all the ground and turn it over. Do not "balk" it, as the farmers say; do not turn aside for little difficulties; drive the plow right through them, beam deep, and turn the ground all up, so that it may all be mellow and soft, and fit to receive the seed and bear fruit a hundred fold.

When you have gone over your whole history in this way, thoroughly, if you will then go over the ground the second time, and give your solemn and fixed attention to it, you will find that the things you have put down will suggest other things of which you have been guilty,



connected with them, or near them. Then go over it a third time, and you will recollect other things connected with these. And you will find in the end that you can remember an amount of your history, and particular actions, even in this life, which you did not think you should remember in eternity. Unless you do take up your sins in this way, and consider them in detail, one by one, you can form no idea of the amount of them. You should go over the list as thoroughly and as carefully, and as solemnly, as you would if you were just preparing yourself for the Judgment.

As you go over the catalogue of your sins, be sure to resolve upon present and entire reformation. Wherever you find any thing wrong, resolve at once, in the strength of God, to sin no more in that way. It will be of no benefit to examine yourself, unless you determine to amend in every particular that which you find wrong in heart, temper, or conduct.

If you find, as you go on with this duty, that your mind is still all dark, cast about you, and you will find there is some reason for the Spirit of God to depart from you. You have not been faithful and thorough. In the progress of such a work you have got to do violence to yourself and bring yourself as a rational being up to this work, with the Bible before you, and try your heart till you *do* feel. You need not expect that God will work a miracle for you to break up your fallow ground. It is to be done by means. Fasten your attention to the subject of your sins. You cannot look at your sins long and thoroughly and see how bad they are, without feeling and feeling deeply.

Experience abundantly proves the benefit of going over our history in this way. Set yourself to the work now; resolve that you never will stop till you find you can *pray*. You never will have the spirit of prayer, till you examine yourself, and confess your sins, and break up your fallow ground. You never will have the Spirit of God dwelling in you, till you have unraveled this whole mystery of iniquity, and spread out your sins before God. Let there be this deep work of repentance, and full confession, this breaking down before God, and you will have as much of the spirit of prayer as your body can bear up under. The reason why so few Christians know anything about the spirit of prayer, is because they never would take the pains to examine themselves properly, and so never knew what it was to have their hearts all broken up in this way.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

1. It will do no good to preach to you while your hearts are in this hardened, and waste, and fallow state. The farmer might just as well sow his grain on the rock. It will bring forth no fruit.

This is the reason why there are so many fruitless professors in the Church, and why there is so much outside machinery, and so little deep-toned feeling in the Church. Look at the Sabbath-school for instance, and see how much machinery there is, and how little of the power of godliness. If you go on in this way, the word of God will continue to harden you, and you will grow worse and worse, just as the rain and snow on an old fallow field makes the turf thicker and the clods stronger.

2. See why so much preaching is wasted, and worse than wasted. It is because the church will not break up their fallow ground. A preacher may wear out his life, and do very little good, while there are so many stony-ground hearers, who have never had their fallow ground broken up. They are only half converted, and their religion is rather a change of opinion than a change of the feeling of their hearts. There is mechanical religion enough, but very little that looks like deep heart-work.

3. Professors of religion should never satisfy themselves, or expect a revival, just by starting out of their slumbers, and blustering about, and talking to sinners. They must get their fallow ground broken up. It is utterly unphilosophical to think of getting engaged in religion in this way. If your fallow ground is broken up, then the way to get more feeling is to go out and see sinners on the road to hell, and talk to them, and guide inquiring souls, and you will get more feeling. You may get into an excitement without this breaking up; you may show a kind of zeal, but it will not last long, and it will not take hold of sinners, unless your hearts are broken up. The reason is, that you go about it mechanically, and have not broken up your fallow ground.

4. And now, finally, will you break up your fallow ground? Will you enter upon the course now pointed out and persevere till you are thoroughly awake? If you fail here, if you do not do *this*, and get prepared, you can go no further with me. I have gone with you as far as it is of any use to go, until your fallow ground is broken up.

Now, you must make thorough work upon this point, or all I have further to say will do you little good. Nay, it will only harden and make you worse. If you do not set about this work immediately, I shall take it for granted that you do not mean to be revived, that you have forsaken your minister, and mean to let him go up to battle alone. If you do not do this, I charge you with having forsaken Christ, with refusing to repent and do your first works.