

MORAL CHARACTER IS INTERNAL INTENTION

By Jesse Morrell

(A section from the booklet "Free Will & Conscience")

Criminality, or guilt, is prescribed to the inward intention of the heart, or to the purpose or motive of the will, and does not consist solely in the outward actions. God is not at all described in the Scriptures as being impressed with outward actions, but rather as looking upon and judging the motives and intentions of the heart (Gen. 6:5; 1 Sam. 16:7; Joel 2:12-14; Matt. 5:8; 6:1-5; 12:35; 15:11, 17-20; 23:25-28; Mk. 7:15-23; Lk. 10:27; Heb. 4:12; 1 Tim. 1:5; Tit. 1:15).

The intention, or motive, is what God is concerned about. As your intention is, so are you (Prov. 23:7). The intention to commit adultery is the same as adultery (Matt. 5:28). The intention to murder is the same as murder (1 Jn. 3:15). A man is as guilty as his intention is. Moral character, or the quality of a person's moral state, consists in the moral condition of their inward intention, being either that of criminality or of rectitude. The Pharisees appeared "outwardly righteous" but were "inwardly full of iniquity" (Matt. 23:28) because they fasted and prayed with the intention to be seen of men (Matt. 6:5; 23:5). They were as their inward motive was, not as their outward works were. They were not even in the least bit righteous, but were "full of iniquity" because what they did, they did selfishly and not benevolently; they did it for themselves and not for God and others, and virtue consists solely in benevolence of heart (Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8; 1 Cor. 13:1-3), while sin consists solely in selfishness of heart.

When the inward intention is morally wrong (*selfish*), the outward action which follows from it, no matter what sort it is (*even praying and fasting*), does not grant any moral character to the moral agent except from its relation to the individual's motive. And where the intention is morally right (*benevolent*), there can be no moral guilt (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23; Tit. 1:15), since guilt is prescribed solely to a wrong (*selfish*) intention. If the inside of the cup (*inward intention*) is first clean, then the outside of the cup (*outward actions*) will be clean as well (Matt. 23:26). "A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things" (Matt. 12:35).

Charles Finney said, "The fact is, that moral agents are so constituted that it is impossible for them not to judge themselves, and others, by their subjective motives and intentions. They cannot but assume, as a first truth, that a man's character is as his intention is, and consequently, that moral obligation respects, directly, intention only."⁷¹

Responsibility, accountability, and, therefore, criminality, do not exceed the boundaries of the inward intention, which, of necessity, inevitably manifests itself in outward action and conduct whenever possible and required (Lk. 6:45).

Because criminality is prescribed to intention, and intention depends upon knowledge (*to intend to do something, one must know they are intending to do something; and for them to be guilty, they must know that their intention is wrong. An intentional choice is of necessity a choice knowingly made*), sinners are therefore sinners not because they do not know any better, but rather because they do not will any better, because they do not intend in accordance with their conscience, in alignment with the intuitions of their reason. Their guilt lies in their knowledge of good and evil, combined with their refusal to choose, will, or intend the good over the evil. If there was no knowledge, there could be no guilt, for moral guilt is measured by moral knowledge. Total ignorance would necessitate total innocence, but knowledge, combined with unwillingness to obey knowledge, necessitates guilt in proportion to the knowledge.

You are as your character is, your character is as your intention is, and your guilt is as your knowledge is. One is as morally guilty as he is unwilling to obey the moral knowledge that he has, no more and no less. A sinner is a criminal for intentionally going against the demands of his conscience. A sinner is a criminal for sinning against his better judgment; for voluntarily, knowingly, and intentionally choosing what he knew was evil when he had the power or ability of choosing the good.

*71 Charles G. Finney; *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 1851 Edition, p. 56