

MAN'S MORAL ABILITY AND THE RELATION IT HAS TO THE MORAL LAW

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

Moral ability and free will are synonymous terms, being identical in nature and meaning. Inability and free will are antonymous terms, being contrary in nature and meaning. Free will is the power of contrary choice. A man is able to do only what a man is free to do; and a man is free to do only what a man is able to do. Freedom speaks of the contingent, not of the necessitated, of that which was voluntarily chosen under liberty, and not that forced by necessity. A freewill choice is a choice that did not have to be chosen, but that was voluntarily chosen when the person could have chosen the opposite.

To be required or obligated to do better, and to be accountable or judged for failure to do better, one must be capable of doing better. To be capable of doing better, one must be free, or able, to do better. What a man is free to do, a man is capable, or able, of doing. If a man is not capable, then a man is not able or free, and if a man is not a free agent, then he is a necessitated agent who can no more have moral character than a puppet or a machine can have moral character. Moral character relates to voluntary or intentional choices commanded or condemned by the God-given intelligence, knowledge, revelation, or conscience, and moral accountability relates to moral character. Therefore, what a man is accountable for, he must not have been necessitated to do, but must have voluntarily committed.

A man is responsible only for that which he is intentionally the cause of, and a man is only the intentional cause of that which is voluntary, since what is voluntary is intentional, and what is intentional is voluntary. And since moral character consists only in free, voluntary, intentional choices, and moral accountability is according to moral character, a man is only accountable for his free, voluntary, intentional choices.

Thomas Chalmers said, "The morality of any act is with its willfulness." And then again, "That an action then be the rightful object, either of moral censure, or approval, it must have had the consent of the will to go along with it. It must be the fruit of volition – else it is utterly beyond the scope, either of praise for its virtuousness or of blame for its criminality. If an action be involuntary, it is as unfit a subject for any moral reckoning, as are the pulsations of the wrist."¹

Respecting the moral government of God (Isa. 9:6-7), or the ruling and reigning of God in the realm of morality over moral agents (Lk. 17:21), in which God is the Governor (Matt. 2:6), the moral commandments of God never exceed the moral ability of men. The commands of God are directed to the ability of man, being instructions as to how a man is to use the liberty of his will, or how a man is to properly use his ability. Since God's moral commandments are directions for man's moral ability, as to how to use this God-given ability, God's moral requirements never exceed this God-given moral

ability. Since God's Moral Government is the governing of man's moral agency (*through persuasion and influence, not through force or necessity*), God's moral commandments never can, never do, and never will exceed man's moral ability or moral agency. Because God's commandments are directions to man, as to how a man is to use his ability, God's commandments are in fact a declaration or a revelation of what man can do and what man should do.

The moral law of God's Moral Government is: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matt. 22:37) and "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt. 22:39). The moral law of God, in essence, is the law of love, love being the total and complete fulfillment of the whole of the law (Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8).

The law of love, or the life of love, is commanded, and the law of selfishness, or the life of selfishness, is condemned. Love is not an involuntary emotion or feeling, but it is a voluntary, impartial committal of the will towards the highest well-being of all (Jn. 3:16; 15:13); it is the intention of the heart, and is synonymous with "good will" (Lk. 2:14; Eph. 6:7; Php. 1:15), and is the same as benevolence.

If love is truly love, it must of necessity manifest itself into action and conduct whenever possible and whenever necessary, performing the required means to secure the end of the well-being of others. The "readiness to will" results in the "performance" or in the "doing" (2 Cor. 8:11). 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), because what is inside will manifest in what is outside whenever possible. A good tree can only produce good fruit, while a bad tree can only produce bad fruit (Matt. 7:17), because the heart, or intention, determines the outward life (Matt. 12:35; Lk. 6:45).

Love, good will, or benevolence satisfies the whole of the law (Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8), but selfishness or self-centeredness is a total and complete violation of the whole of the law (Jas. 2:10). To break one letter of the law is to break the whole spirit of the law; which the entire letter of the law is derived from. The letter of the law is derived from the spirit of the law; therefore, to break one letter of the law is to break the whole spirit of the law. He that breaks the one breaks the whole. Therefore, to "offend in one point" is to be "guilty of all" (Jas. 2:10).

Notice that God does not command that we love Him with faculties that we do not possess, but rather that we love Him with all that we currently possess, "with all thy," as opposed to with that which is not currently yours. The commandments are directions to man as to how he is to use his ability. The commandments of God are not impossible, demanding that we love Him with a heart, soul, mind and strength that we do not have. Rather, it is possible to keep the law of God, which demands that we love Him with all of what we do have, with all that we are capable of, to the very highest of our ability, no more and no less. It is possible to keep the law because we are capable, and we are capable because it is possible to keep the law; our God-given commandments and our God-given ability directly correspond with each other. The command of God is that we

love to the very highest of our ability, no more and no less, and therefore we are able to keep the law of love; we are able to keep the commandments of Jesus (1 Jn. 2:3; 3:22; 5:2-3; Rev. 12:17; 14:12; 22:14). Obedience is always possible, and disobedience is never necessary or unavoidable. The highest that our ability is capable of is all that the law of God commands, no more and no less. The law of God is the law of our ability, to love Him supremely and our neighbor equally, according to our ability, with all of our ability, “with all thy.”

Clemens of Alexandrinus said that the call of “the Divine word... requireth but that which is according to the ability and strength of every one.”² Gordon Olson said, “The words ‘all thy’ express our obligation. It is the exertion of ‘thy’ personality and ability that is required – ‘all’ this ability.”³ Charles Finney said, “Entire obedience is the entire consecration of the powers, as they are, to God. It does not imply any change in them, but simply the right use of them.”⁴ Again Finney said that the law “simply requires us to use what strength we have. The very wording of the law is proof conclusive, that it extends its demands only to the full amount of what strength we have. And this is true of every moral being, however great or small.”⁵ And Asa Mahan said, “the law, addressing men...requires them to love God with all their ‘mind and strength,’ that is...with the power they now actually possess.”⁶

God commands that you use “thy heart” and “thy soul” and “thy mind.” Clement of Alexandria said, “What the commandments direct are in our own power...”⁷ The command of God is directed towards our current faculties, and it does not exceed the limits of those faculties. We are to love him with “all” of these faculties, not with less or with more than those faculties are capable of. Man is not responsible for more than he can perform, and so man is not accountable for more than he can perform. Man’s responsibility is in accordance with all of his ability, and man’s accountability is according to his responsibility. Therefore, man will not be accountable for that which was beyond his power because man is not accountable beyond his responsibility, and his responsibility is never beyond his ability.

Man’s moral ability is naturally and obviously limited by moral possibilities; therefore, God’s moral commandments never require moral impossibilities, for that which is morally impossible cannot be morally commanded. God cannot morally demand a moral impossibility. Augustine said, “God does not demand impossibilities.”⁸ Charles Finney said, “The law of God requires nothing more of any human being, than that which he is at present naturally able to perform, under the present circumstances of his being.”⁹

The extent of God’s commandments is the exact extent of man’s ability, and the extent of man’s ability is the extent of God’s commandments; each one establishes and determines the limitations and boundaries of the other, and since man will be judged by the commandments, the extent of man’s accountability will be the extent of man’s ability. A man will not be accountable for that which he was not capable of; he will not be judged for that which was outside of the realm of his control.

The law of God is therefore the law of our ability: to love Him supremely and our neighbor equally, according to our ability, with all of our ability, to the highest of our ability, no more and no less. There is, then, no inability in which a sinner can hide behind as an excuse, no commandment that a sinner can point to as tyrannical, since all the commandments of God can be kept, without exception.

All sin is, therefore, inexcusable since all sin is voluntary and avoidable; that which brings moral guilt is always voluntary and avoidable. What is unavoidable is excusable, but what is inexcusable must be avoidable. What is punishable must be voluntary, and what is voluntary must be avoidable. What is punishable must be vice, and what is vice must be voluntary. Only sin can be punishable, and only what is voluntary and avoidable can be sin. Therefore, sin is inexcusable and punishable because sin is voluntary and avoidable, and it is voluntary and avoidable because God has given man free will.

Justin the Martyr said, “We have learned from the prophets, and we hold it to be true, that punishment, chastisement, and rewards are rendered according to the merit of each man’s actions. Otherwise, if all things happen by fate, then nothing is our own power. For if it is predestined that one man be good and another man evil, then the first is not deserving of praise and the other to be blamed. Unless humans have the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions – whatever they may be ... for neither would a man be worthy of praise if he did not himself choose the good, but was merely created for that end. Likewise, if a man were evil, he would not deserve punishment, since he was not evil of himself, being unable to do anything else than what he was made for.”¹⁰

Charles Finney said, “Moral agency implies the possession of free-will. By free-will it is intended the power of choosing or refusing to choose, in every instance, in compliance with moral obligation. Free-will implies the power of originating and deciding our own choices, and of exercising our own sovereignty, in every instance of choice upon moral questions, of deciding or choosing in conformity with duty or otherwise in all cases of moral obligation . . . unless the will is free, man has no freedom; and if he has no freedom he is not a moral agent, that is, he is incapable of moral action and also of moral character. Free-will then, in the above defined sense, must be a condition of moral agency, and, of course, of moral obligation.”¹¹

Miner Raymond said, “It is axiomatic that that for which any agent is morally responsible must be within his control. If man be responsible for obedience or disobedience to the divine commands, then obedience and disobedience are both equally within his power. Which of them shall result is not determined by any thing external to him. His own power of choice selects the one, it being at the same time a power equally adequate to select the other. That for which an agent is morally responsible must be an election; that is, a selection with an alternative.”¹² L. D. McCabe said, “Accountability necessitates the origination of choice between obedience and disobedience.”¹³ And again, “A free, original, independent, conscious choice between good and evil, is the sine qua non [condition] of every act that involves morality.”¹⁴

A man is only accountable for his moral character. His moral character is his heart or intention (*which necessarily manifests into action whenever possible*). A man's intention is within the realm of his control (*or else it cannot be his*). Intention must be voluntary, and what is voluntary must be avoidable. Therefore, a man is only accountable for his intentional, voluntary, avoidable choices or intentions.

God holds men accountable to their responsibility. What God requires of man God expects from men, what God expects from men is possible for men, and what is possible for men is the same as what men are capable of. Accountability implies requirement, requirement implies expectation, expectation implies possibility, and possibility implies capability.

Man is accountable for choosing sin only because he is capable of choosing righteousness over sin. A man is accountable for choosing darkness over the light only because he is capable of choosing the light over darkness. A man is accountable for disobedience because he is capable of choosing obedience over disobedience. A man is accountable for rejecting Jesus only because he is capable of following Jesus. A man is responsible and accountable according to that which is within his realm of control, according to that which is within his power. A man will be judged by his ability, no more and no less, since the commands of God require nothing more than that which is within man's moral ability, that which is within the realm of moral possibilities.

Consider the great disappointment of God over mankind (Gen. 6:5-6, Ps. 81:13, Eze. 6:9). Now consider the logical implications of disappointment. Disappointment requires expectation, and reasonable expectation requires capabilities or potential. Disappointment arises when failed expectations, which were based upon potential possibilities, occur. God's great disappointment with mankind is rooted in mankind's great potential, moral capabilities, or open possibilities, which were given to mankind by God Himself. And if God's disappointment comes from God's expectations, and if God legislates according to His expectations, that is, if God's requirements are the same thing as His expectations, then all of God's requirements are perfectly matched by mankind's capabilities or potential because God's expectations are according to man's capabilities or potential. Once again we clearly see that God's requirements never exceed man's capabilities. What God genuinely requires God must genuinely desire. And if God genuinely desires it, then God will enable man to do it.

Irenaeus said, "God made man free from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the commandments of God voluntarily."¹⁵ If God does not grant man the genuine ability to obey it must be because God does not genuinely want man to obey. But if God genuinely wants to be obeyed it must be understood that God grants man the ability to genuinely obey. If God wants man to voluntarily obey, God must make it possible for man to voluntarily obey since it is in His power to make this ability available to man. That which He requires He supplies the ability to achieve. If God commands the parting of the red sea, God will supply the power to do it (Ex. 14:26-27). If God commands moral perfection of heart from men (Gen. 17:1,

Deut. 18:13, Matt. 5:48) God supplies the ability for it to be achieved (1 Cor. 10:13). Those whom God holds morally responsible and morally accountable are those whom God has made or created morally free, morally capable, or morally able with open possibilities and natural potential.

So man has a free will because man was made with one, because man was made in the image of God. Winkie Pratney said, “Free choice is a reality with man because it is a reality in God.”¹⁶ Gordon Olson said, “God designed man’s constitution, with its profound abilities and reactions, to enable him to achieve great heights of comprehension and moral nobility in the imitation of his Creator.”¹⁷

*1 Thomas Chalmers; *The Bridgewater Treatise* by T. Chalmers, 1835 Edition, p. 272, 273, published by Corie, Lea, & Blanchard

*2 Clemens of Alexandrinus; *An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* by John Fletcher, Volume Two, p. 204, published by Carlton & Porter

*3 Gordon Olson; *The Kindness of God Our Savior*, p. 10, published by Revival Theology Promotion

*4 Charles Finney; *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 1878 Edition, p. 129, published by Bethany House

*5 Charles Finney; *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 1878 Edition, p. 134, published by Bethany House

*6 Asa Mahan; *The Doctrine of the Will* by Asa Mahan, p. 118, published by Truth in Heart

*7 Clement of Alexandria; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 295, published by Hendrickson Publishers

*8 Augustine; *Joy and Strength*, 1929 Edition, p. 192, published by Grosset & Dunlap

*9 Charles G. Finney; *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 1851 Edition, p. 35

*10 Justin the Martyr, *First Apology* Chap. 43

*11 Charles G. Finney; *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 1851 Edition, p. 46-47

*12 Miner Raymond; *Systematic Theology*, Volume One, 1877 Edition, p. 520-521, published by Granston & Stowe

*13 L. D. McCabe; *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies a Necessity*, p. 67

*14 L. D. McCabe; *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies a Necessity*, p. 74

*15 Irenaeus; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 286, published by Hendrickson Publishers

*16 Winkie Pratney; *The Nature and Character of God*, 1988, p. 205, Bethany House Publishing

¹⁷ Gordon Olson; *The Kindness of God Our Savior*, p. 61, published by Revival Theology Promotion