

## RELATION OF THE MORAL CHARACTER OF GOD TO THE MORAL LAW OF GOD

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

E. M. Bounds asked, "Does God give commandments which men cannot obey? Is He so arbitrary, so severe, so unloving, as to issue commandments which cannot be obeyed? The answer is that in all of annals of Holy Scripture, not a single instance is recorded of God having commanded any man to do a thing, which was beyond his power. Is God so unjust and so inconsiderate as to require of man that which he is unable to render? To infer is to slander the character of God."18

God is not a tyrant, and His laws are not tyrannical. Pharaoh commanded brick, but gave no straw, and then beat those who failed to perform the impossible. Pharaoh was a tyrant for doing such, and scripture assigns the fault to Pharaoh, not with those subservient to him (Ex. 5:16). The moral fault was with the commander, not with the command breakers. The infallible testimony of Divine Inspiration declares that when an impossible law is broken, the problem is with the law itself and with the one who issued the law.

That which is a vice in Pharaoh would not and could not be virtue in God. What scripture condemns in one is condemnable in all. What is a vice in one is a vice in all. The equality and impartiality of justice demands that what mars the character of one must mar the character of all, and that which is a blemish to one must be a blemish to all.

Tertullian said, God granted man the free will "that he might constantly be the master of his own conduct by voluntarily doing good, and by voluntarily avoiding evil: because, man being appointed for God's judgment, *it was necessary to the justice of God's sentence* that man should be judged according to the merits [or demerits] of his free will."19

God does not command obedience when He gives no ability to perform that which is commanded, only to punish with eternal torment those who do not obey when they had no ability to obey. The fault would, according to the Divine Scriptures, be with the commander, not with the command breaker, when the commands are broken. Sin would ultimately be the fault of the one who gave the unreasonable law, since sin is transgression of the law (1 Jn. 3:4), and there can be no transgression where there is no law (Rom. 4:15; 5:13; 1 Jn. 3:4); therefore, transgression of the impossible law is the fault of the law itself, and the fault of the one who decreed the law. Sin, then, would not and could not be the fault of the one who broke the law that naturally could not be kept. The one who decrees an impossible law must be the ultimate author and actual cause of sin. The precious truth of revelation, however, is that God is not the author of sin; He is not the ultimate cause of transgression, because God's moral laws are not unreasonable, but can, in fact, be kept. Natural revelation (*conscience*) and supernatural revelation

(*scripture*) assign the fault of sin to sinful men; they are the cause of their own rebellion; they are the authors of their own sin. Sinners are misusing and abusing their God-given free will. Tertullian said that the person who chooses to sin chooses to “make a bad use of his created constitution”.<sup>20</sup>

God’s moral government, or moral Kingdom, is not a tyrannical one, but a reasonable and just one. God does not condemn the incapable for failure to perform the impossible, but condemns the able, those “who have received the law . . . but have not kept it” (Acts 7:53), for failure to perform the possible, for voluntarily and freely choosing darkness over the light (Jn. 3:19). Sinners abide under the wrath of God for being criminals by choice, not for being cripples by birth. The fault is with their own choices (Isa. 14:13-14; Lk. 19:14, 27; Jn. 5:40), not with their God-given constitution (Ecc. 7:29).

God’s execution of condemnation is justly exerted upon the capable for violation of commandments that could be kept. Condemnation for violation of commandments is justly deserved upon condition of capability, upon condition of being able to keep the commandments. Condemnation for breaking a law that could not be kept is unjust condemnation. Eternal damnation for breaking that which was unavoidably and inevitably to be broken is unjust eternal damnation. God does not send to hell those who are victims of their birth, victims of nature, victims of their parents, or victims of fate, who hadn’t any power, option, or ability of obeying all that was required of them. Rather, God sends deserving criminals and rebels to eternal hell (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Rev. 21:8), those who freely, of their own accord, chose to walk contrary to the righteous demands of God’s reasonable and just commandments, when it was well within their power, well within their ability of will, to obey and conform to all of their moral obligations and requirements.

John Fletcher said, “It is offering an insult to the only wise God to suppose . . . that he gave them the Gospel, without giving them power to believe it . . . With regards to repentance, ‘Then he began,’ says St. Matthew, ‘to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not.’ Merciful Savior, forgive us! We have insulted thy meek wisdom, by representing thee as cruelly upbraiding the lame for not running, the blind for not seeing, and the dumb for not speaking! . . . Suppose a schoolmaster said to his English scholars ‘Except you instantly speak Greek you shall all be severely whipped.’ You would wonder at the injustice of the school tyrant. But would not the wretch be merciful in comparison of a Savior, (so called) who is supposed to say to myriads of men, that can no more repent than ice can burn, ‘Except ye repent, ye shall all perish?’”<sup>21</sup>

Winkie Pratney said, “Many sincere men are saying, ‘God gave us good laws to keep,’ and in the next breath saying, ‘we are actually unable to keep them!’ If this is true, then God’s laws are not good! No law is good that asks the impossible of its subjects. If God demands obedience to impossible laws then God is not just . . . If God demands such obedience under penalty of death, then God is not only unfair, but monstrous. What kind of being would pass laws upon his subjects they are unable to keep, and then condemn

them to death for their failure to obey? This is a blasphemy on God's character."22

To assume that God commands the impossible at the threat of eternal torment is to directly slander the character of God; it is to blame God for our sin rather than to rightly blame ourselves! Cruelty cannot be ascribed to God's character because injustice cannot be ascribed to His government. The character of God does not allow anyone to go to hell for failure to perform moral impossibilities, but only for failure to perform moral possibilities, for being unwilling, but not unable.

Men cannot blame God or His laws for their own disobedience and rebellion. God is not responsible for the sin of the world because God's has granted man a free will and has only decreed laws that are reasonable and good. All men who voluntarily choose to disobey God are responsible for their own sin. Sinners cannot blame God or His laws for sin. God blames them, that is, He blames their own will for their own sin.

John Fletcher asked "if you take away free will, how does he [God] judge the world?"23 Justin Martyr said, "Unless the human race

has the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions."24 Again he said, "We [Christians] maintain that each man acts rightly or sins by free choice... Since God in the beginning made the race of angels and men with free will, they will *justly* suffer in eternal fire the punishment of whatever sins they have committed."25 Origen said, "The Savior...declares that it lies with us to keep what is commanded and that we will *reasonably* be liable to condemnation if we transgress."26 Lactantius said, "And he [God] can give a punishment for those who do not obey – for it was in their power to obey if they so wished."27 Clement of Alexandria said, "Each one of us who sins with his own free will, chooses punishment. So the blame lies with him who chooses."28 Again he said, "It is by one's own fault that he does not choose what is best."29 And again, "If one chooses to continue in pleasures and to sin perpetually,... let him no longer blame either God, riches, or his having fallen. Rather, let him blame his own soul, which voluntarily perishes."30

The Bible exalts God and glorifies His moral character, and says that, because of God's eternal character, He never, in any circumstance, allows anyone to be tempted beyond his or her moral ability. A sin-hating, sin-punishing God provides a way for all sin to be avoided in all cases, always, without exception, providing a way of escape so that we are all, always, able to obey instead of disobey. This is an immutable principle of justice rooted in the immutable character of God. "There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that *ye are able*; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be *able* to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13). Origen said, "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able to bear.' That is, each one is tempted in proportion to the amount of his strength or power of resistance."31

Temptation would not be tempting if it were forced; what is forced cannot be considered temptation. Temptation is the inclination towards one choice over the other,

the influence towards a decision or direction. Temptation is not the forcing of one choice over the other; it is not the necessitating of one decision or direction. Force, or causation, is not the nature of temptation, but inclination or influence is. Causation and influence are different by nature. Temptation can only respect contingent volitions, relating to that which may or may not occur, but temptation cannot respect certain or necessitated volitions, relating to that which will and must occur. So if man is not a free agent, if man is not an individual personality possessing free will, man could never suffer temptation. And if man never faced temptation, man could never create a moral character. And if man did not have a moral character, man could not be accountable for anything.

Where sin is forced, there could neither be sin nor temptation. But where there is sin and where there is temptation, there must be the freedom of the will. All men are tempted to sin, but no man is forced to sin, because all men are capable of not sinning. If this were not true, neither temptation nor sin could exist for the sinner or for the saint. For sin to be sin, for temptation to be temptation, and for a person to have moral guilt, sin must be voluntary and avoidable, never necessitated or forced. For temptation (*or motive*) to be temptation, it must be only influence, never causation. And so “temptation” is “common” to all men, because the power of contrary choice is common to all men. All men have the freedom of their wills, and so the Scripture is undeniably true that “ye are able” (1 Cor. 10:13).

Charles Finney said, “Now a moral agent must be able, in the proper sense of this term, to resist every degree of moral influence, or else he cannot be a moral agent. His action must be responsible action, and therefore must be performed of his own free will and accord; no power can interpose in such measure as to overbear or interfere with his own responsible agency.”<sup>32</sup> We are never overpowered by internal or external temptation, we are never forced by internal or external motives, because God always provides a way of escape; He never allows it to be beyond our ability, so that we are always “able” to resist and escape. So sin is always voluntary and requires the consent of the will (Job 11:14; Ecc. 11:14; Matt. 23:26; Rom. 6:12). Clement of Alexandria said, “Sin, then, is voluntary on my part.”<sup>33</sup>

1 Corinthians 10:13 directly and explicitly depicts the eternal character of God as it relates to man’s ability and temptations. God is always just towards all men, faithful at all times. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). Because of the eternally holy, eternally good, eternally just character of God, the commandments of God are never tyrannical or burdensome, but are always moral and reasonable, and are always able to be kept by all who are obligated to keep them.

“God is faithful,” therefore “ye are able” (1 Cor. 10:13). “Able” signifies possibility, power or ability. The only reason “ye are able” is because “God is faithful.” To declare that “ye are not able” would require the declaration that “God is not faithful.” God’s character determines what God commands, and what God commands is always in accordance to our ability; the moral law always respects our ability by brilliantly declaring “with all thy” (Matt. 22:37).

Since God's moral character determines what God publicly declares as a command, then when dealing with the moral commandments of God, we are directly dealing with the moral character of God, and only subsequently dealing with the capabilities of men. The moral character of God is the primary issue while the moral capacities of men are only the secondary or necessarily connected issue.

*(I properly recognize that God's commandments are ultimately derived from the intrinsic value of His well-being, seeing that His well-being is naturally and eternally of intrinsic value, whose likeness we were made in the image of (Gen. 1:26). Treatment is determined by value (Lk. 12:7). God commands that which promotes the highest well-being of all, and condemns that which demotes the highest well-being of all (Deut. 6:3, 24; 10:12-13; Jer. 7:23; 32:39; Lk. 6:9), commanding the means that are relatively good and condemning the means that are relatively harmful (Matt. 22:37; Mk. 12:30; Lk. 10:27; Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8), in relation to or in accordance with the end which is intrinsically good (well-being) and the end which is intrinsically evil (ill-being) (Lk. 16:25).*

*All moral agents necessarily presuppose the intrinsic value of well-being, their consciences condemning that which is harmful to others while commanding that which is helpful to others. God morally requires of men that which is good for all, and forbids that which is harmful to all, except in those cases when a moral agent forfeits that right by disregarding the intrinsic value of the well-being of others, therefore bringing upon himself the deserved punishment of torment. Because God commands the good and forbids the evil, we can never question the wisdom and goodness of God's moral commandments without questioning the character and intelligence of the Commander.*

*God's will acts voluntarily in accordance with His intelligence, His character being derived from His will, which voluntarily declares and determines His public and universal commandments. So while the ultimate foundation of God's commandments is found in His eternal nature, that is, in the intrinsic and eternal value of His well-being, as demanded by His Divine Intelligence, it is still properly true that "God's character determines God's commandments," that is, God's character ultimately determines what He voluntarily, publicly declares, and universally requires, of all moral agents. Therefore, to attack the goodness and reasonableness of God's commandments is to directly attack the character of God; it is to accuse God of not being good and reasonable in His moral government.)*

God declares, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:30). "His commandments are not grievous." (1 Jn. 5:3) Because His yoke, burden, and commandments are easy and light, and are not grievous, "ye are able" to keep them. To say "ye are not able" is to say His yoke, burden, and commandments are hard, heavy and burdensome, which would be contrary to the direct and explicit declarations God has given of Himself. The one who misrepresents the commandments must of necessity misrepresent the Commander.

Therefore, the declaration of the ability of man is an exaltation of the character of God, and the renunciation of the ability of man is a denunciation of the character of God. The one who rejects the ability of man thereby slanders and undermines the wisdom of God's Divine Intelligence and the goodness of God's Divine Character.

- \*18 E. M. Bounds; *The Complete Works of E. M. Bounds on Prayer*, p. 53; published by Baker Books
- \*19 Tertullian; *An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* by John Fletcher, Volume Two, p. 200, published by Carlton & Porter
- \*20 Tertullian; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 285, published by Hendrickson Publishers
- \*21 John Fletcher; *Checks to Antinomianism* by John Fletcher, Volume One, pg 142, 145, 146, published by Carlton & Porter
- \*22 Winkie Pratney; *The Nature of Sin*, pg 5
- \*23 John Fletcher; *An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism*, Volume Two, p. 206, published by Carlton & Porter
- \*24 Justin Martyr; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 285, published by Hendrickson Publishers
- \*25 Justin Martyr; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 285, published by Hendrickson Publishers
- \*26 Origen; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 289, published by Hendrickson Publishers
- \*27 Lactantius; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 293, published by Hendrickson Publishers
- \*28 Clement of Alexandria; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 287, published by Hendrickson Publishers
- \*29 Clement of Alexandria; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 287, published by Hendrickson Publishers
- \*30 Clement of Alexandria; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 288, published by Hendrickson Publishers
- \*31 Origen; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 295, published by Hendrickson Publishers
- \*32 Charles Finney; *Principles of Salvation*, p. 244, Published by Bethany House
- \*33 Clement of Alexandria; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 287, published by Hendrickson Publishers