

The Rev. CHARLES G. FINNEY'S SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

1851

LECTURE XXV.

MORAL GOVERNMENT.

WHAT CONSTITUTES DISOBEDIENCE TO MORAL LAW.

In discussing this question, I will,

I. *Revert to some points that have been settled.*

II. *Show what disobedience to the moral law cannot consist in.*

III. *What it must consist in.*

I. *Revert to some points that have been settled.*

1. That moral law requires love or benevolence, and that this is the sum of its requirements.

2. That benevolence is good-will to being in general. In other words, that it consists in the impartial choice of the good of being, as an end, or for its own sake.

3. That obedience to moral law is a unit, or that it invariably consists in disinterested benevolence. That consecration to the highest good of being, is virtue, and comprehensive of the whole of virtue.

4. That feeling and outward action are only results of ultimate intention, and in themselves are neither virtue nor vice.

5. That all choice and volition must terminate upon some object, and that this object must be chosen as an end, or as a means.

6. That the choice of anything as a means to an end is, in fact, only carrying into execution the ultimate choice, or the choice of an end.

7. That the mind must have chosen an end, or it cannot choose the means. That is, the choice of means implies the previous choice of an end.

8. That moral character belongs to the ultimate intention only, or to the choice of an end.

9. That virtue, or obedience to moral law, consists in choosing in accordance with the demands of the intellect, in opposition to following the feelings, desires, or impulses of the sensibility.

10. That whatever is chosen for its own sake, and not as a means to an end, is and must be chosen as an end.

11. That the mind must always have an end in view, or it cannot choose at all. That is, as has been said, the will must have an object of choice, and this object must be regarded as an end, or as a means.

12. That the fundamental reason for choosing an end, and the end chosen, are identical. That is, the fundamental reason of the obligation to choose a thing, must be found in the nature of the thing itself, and this reason is the end or thing chosen. For example: if the intrinsic value of a thing be the foundation of the obligation to choose it, the intrinsically valuable is the end or thing chosen.

II. *Show in what disobedience to moral law cannot consist.*

1. It cannot consist in malevolence, or in the choice of evil or misery as an ultimate end. This will appear, if we consider,--

(1.) That the choice of an end implies the choice of it, not for no reason, but for a reason, and for its own intrinsic value, or because the mind prizes it on its own account. But moral agents are so constituted, that they cannot regard misery as intrinsically valuable. They cannot, therefore, choose it as an ultimate end, nor prize it on its own account.

(2.) To will misery as an ultimate end, would imply the choice of universal misery, and every degree of it, according to its relative amount.

(3.) The choice of universal misery as an end, implies the choice of all the means necessary to that end.

(4.) The end chosen is identical with the reason for choosing it. To say that a thing can be chosen without any reason, is to say that nothing is chosen, or that there is no object of choice, or that there is actually no choice. Misery may be chosen to assert our own

sovereignty; but this were to choose self-gratification, and not misery, as an ultimate end. To choose misery as an ultimate end, is to choose it, not to assert my own sovereignty, nor for any other reason than because it is misery.

(5.) To choose an end is not to choose without any reason, as has been said, but for some reason.

(6.) To choose misery as an end, is to choose it for the reason that it is misery, and that misery is preferred to happiness, for its own sake, which is absurd. Such a supposition overlooks the very nature of choice.

(7.) To will misery as a means is possible, but this is not malevolence, but might be either benevolence or selfishness.

(8.) The constitution of moral beings renders malevolence, or the willing of misery for its own sake, impossible. Therefore disobedience to moral law cannot consist in malevolence.

2. Disobedience to moral law cannot consist in the constitution of soul or body. The law does not command us to have a certain constitution, nor forbid us to have the constitution with which we came into being.

3. It cannot consist in any unavoidable state, either of the sensibility or of the intelligence; for these, as we have seen, are involuntary, and are dependent upon the actings of the will.

4. It cannot consist in outward actions, independent of the design with which they are put forth, for these, we have seen are controlled by the actions of the will, and, therefore, can have no moral character in themselves.

5. It cannot consist in inaction: for total inaction is to a moral agent impossible. Moral agents are necessarily active. That is, they cannot exist as moral agents without choice. They must, by a law of necessity, choose either in accordance with, or in opposition to, the law of God. They are free to choose in either direction, but they are not free to abstain from choice altogether. Choose they must. The possession of free-will, and the perception of opposing objects of choice, either exciting desire, or developing the rational affirmation of obligation to choose, render choice one way or the other inevitable. The law directs how they ought to choose. If they do not choose thus, it must be because they choose otherwise, and not because they do not choose at all.

6. It cannot consist in the choice of moral evil, or sin, as an ultimate end. Sin is but an element or attribute of choice or intention, or it is intention itself. If it be intention itself, then to make sin an end of intention, would be to make intention or choice terminate on itself, and the sinner must choose his own choice, or intend his own intention as an end: this is absurd.

If sin is but an element or attribute of choice or intention, then to suppose the sinner to choose it as an end, were to make choice or intention terminate on an element or attribute of itself, to suppose him to choose as an end an element of his own choice. This also is absurd and a contradiction.

The nature of a moral being forbids that he should choose sin for its own sake. He may choose those things the choosing of which is sinful, but it is not the sinfulness of the choice upon which the intention terminates. This is naturally impossible. Sin may be chosen as a means of gratifying a malicious feeling, but this is not choosing it as an end, but as a means. Malevolence, strictly speaking, is in itself impossible to a moral agent. That is, the choice of moral or natural evil for its own sake, contradicts the nature of moral agents, and the nature of ultimate choice, and is therefore impossible. In common language we may charge them with malevolence; but, strictly speaking, the evil is not the end, but the gratification of the malicious feeling of the selfish being is the end.

7. Disobedience to moral law cannot consist in self-love. Self-love is simply the constitutional desire of happiness. It is altogether an involuntary state. It has, as a desire, no moral character, any more than has the desire of food. It is no more sinful to desire happiness, and properly to seek it, than it is wrong to desire food, and properly to seek that.

III. *What disobedience to moral law must consist in.*

1. It must consist in choice or ultimate intention, for moral character belongs strictly only to ultimate intention.

2. As all choice must terminate on an end, or on means, and as the means cannot be chosen until the end is chosen, and but for its sake, it follows that disobedience to the moral law must consist in the choice of some end, or ends, inconsistent with its requisitions.

3. We have seen that misery, or natural evil, cannot be chosen as an end by a moral agent. So this cannot be the end chosen.

4. We have seen also that moral evil, or sin, cannot be chosen as an ultimate end.

5. Disobedience to God's law must consist in the choice of self-gratification as an end. In other words, it must consist essentially in committing the will, and through the will committing the whole being, to the indulgence of self-love, as the supreme and ultimate end of life. This is selfishness. In other words, it is seeking to gratify the desire of personal good, in a manner prohibited by the law of God.

It consists in choosing self-gratification as an end, or for its own sake, instead of choosing, in accordance with the law of the reason and of God, the highest well-being of God and of the universe as an ultimate end. In other words still, sin or disobedience to the moral law, consists in the consecration of the heart and life to the gratification of the

constitutional and artificial desires, rather than in obedience to the law of the intelligence. Or, once more, sin consists in being governed by impulses of the sensibility, instead of being governed by the law of God, as it lies revealed in the reason.

That this is sin, and the whole of sin, viewed in its germinating principles, will appear, if we consider:--

1. That this state of mind, or this choice is the "carnal mind," or the minding of the flesh, which the apostle affirms to be "enmity against God."

2. It is the universal representation of scripture, that sin consists in the spirit of self-seeking.

3. This spirit of self-seeking is always in the Bible represented as the contrast or opposite of disinterested benevolence, or the love which the law requires. "Ephraim bringeth forth fruit to himself," is the sum of God's charges against sinners.

4. Selfishness is always spoken of in terms of reprobation in the Bible.

5. It is known by every moral agent to be sinful.

6. It is, in fact, the end which all unregenerate men pursue, and the only end they pursue.

7. When we come to the consideration of the attributes of selfishness, it will be seen that every form of sin, not only may, but must resolve itself into selfishness, just as we have seen that every form of virtue does and must resolve itself into love or benevolence.

8. From the laws of its constitution, the mind is shut up to the necessity of choosing that, as an ultimate end, which is regarded by the mind as intrinsically good or valuable in itself. This is the very idea of choosing an end, to wit, something chosen for its own sake, or for what it is in and of itself, or, because it is regarded by the mind as intrinsically valuable to self, or to being in general, or to both.

9. The gratification or happiness of being is necessarily regarded by the mind as a good in itself, or as intrinsically valuable.

10. Nothing else is or can be regarded as valuable in itself, or finally, but the good of being.

11. Moral agents are, therefore, shut up to the necessity of willing the good of being, either partially or impartially, either good to self, or good to being in general. Nothing else can possibly be chosen as an end or for its own sake. Willing the good of being impartially, as we have seen, is virtue. To will it partially is to will it, not for its own sake, except upon condition of its relation to self. That is, it is to will good to self. In other words, it is to will the gratification of self as an end, in opposition to willing the

good of universal being as an end, and every good, or the good of every being, according to its intrinsic value.

12. But may not one will the good of a part of being as an end, or for the sake of the intrinsic value of their good? This would not be benevolence, for that, as we have seen, must consist in willing good for its own sake, and implies the willing of every good, and of the highest good of universal being. It would not be selfishness, as it would not be willing good to, or the gratification of, self. It would be sin, for it would be the partial love or choice of good. It would be loving some of my neighbours, but not all of them. It would, therefore, be sin, but not selfishness. If this can be, then there is such a thing possible, whether actual or not, as sin that does not consist in selfishness. But let us examine whether this supposition would not resolve itself into selfishness.

To say that I choose good for its own sake, or because it is valuable to being, that is, in obedience to the law of my reason, and of God, implies that I choose all possible good, and every good according to its relative value. If, then, a being chooses his own good, or the good of any being as an ultimate end, in obedience to the law of reason, it must be that he chooses, for the same reason, the highest possible good of all sentient being.

The partial choice of good implies the choice of it, not merely for its own sake, but upon condition of its relations to self, or to certain particular persons. Its relations conditionate the choice. When its relations to self conditionate the choice, so that it is chosen, not for its intrinsic value, irrespective of its relations, but for its relations to self, this is selfishness. It is the partial choice of good. If I choose the good of others besides myself, and choose good because of its relations to them, it must be either--

1. Because I love their persons with the love of fondness, and will their good for that reason, that is, to gratify my affection for them, which is selfishness; or--

2. Because of their relations to me, so that good to them is in some way a good to me, which also is selfishness; or--

3. Upon condition that they are worthy, which is benevolence; for if I will good to a being upon condition that he is worthy, I must value the good for its own sake, and will it particularly to him, because he deserves it. This is benevolence, and not the partial choice of good, because it is obeying the law of my reason. If I will the good of any being, or number of beings, it must be for some reason. I must will it as an end, or as a means. If I will it as an end, it must be the universal or impartial choice of good. If I will it as a means, it must be as a means to some end. The end cannot be their good for its own sake, for this would be willing it as an end, and not as a means. If I will it as a means, it must be as a means of my own gratification.

Again: If I will the good of any number of beings, I must do it in obedience to the law either of my intelligence and of God, or of my sensibility. But, if I will in obedience to the law of my intelligence, it must be the choice of the highest good of universal being.

But if I will in obedience to the law or impulse of my sensibility, it must be to gratify my feelings or desires. This is selfishness.

Again: As the will must either follow the law of the reason and of God, or the impulses of the sensibility, it follows that moral agents are shut up to the necessity of being selfish or benevolent, and that there is no third way, because there is no third medium, through which any object of choice, can be presented. The mind can absolutely know nothing as an object of choice, that is not recommended by one of these faculties. Selfishness, then, and benevolence, are the only two alternatives.

Therefore, disobedience to the moral law must essentially consist in selfishness, and in selfishness alone.

It has been said, that a moral agent may will the good of others for its own sake, and yet not will the good of all. That is, that he may will the good of some for its intrinsic value, and yet not will universal good. But this is absurd. To make the valuable the object of choice for its own sake, without respect to any conditions or relations, is the same as to will all possible and universal good: that is, the one necessarily implies and includes the other. It has been asserted, for example, that an infidel abolitionist may be conscious of willing and seeking the good of the slave for its own sake, or disinterestedly, and yet not exercise universal benevolence. I reply, he deceives himself, just as a man would, who would say, he chooses fruit for its own sake. The fact is, he is conscious of desiring fruit for its own sake. But he does not and cannot choose it for its own sake. He chooses it in obedience to his desire, that is, to gratify his desire. So it is, and must be, with the infidel abolitionist. It cannot be that he chooses the good of the slave in obedience to the law of his intelligence and of God; for if he did, his benevolence would be universal. It must be, then, that he chooses the good of the slave, because he desires it, or to gratify a constitutional desire. Men naturally desire their own happiness, and the happiness of others: this is constitutional. But when, in obedience to these desires, they will their own or others' happiness, they seek to gratify their sensibility or desires: this is selfishness.

Let it be remembered, then, that sin is a unit, and always and necessarily consists in selfish ultimate intention, and in nothing else. This intention is sin; and thus we see that every phase of sin resolves itself into selfishness. This will appear more and more, as we proceed to unfold the subject of moral depravity.

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LECTURE XXVI. MORAL GOVERNMENT.

WHAT IS NOT IMPLIED IN DISOBEDIENCE TO MORAL LAW.

In this discussion, I will

I. *State briefly what constitutes disobedience.*

II. *Show what is not implied in it.*

I. *What constitutes disobedience.*

We have seen that all sin or disobedience to moral law is a unit, and that it consists in selfishness, or in the choice of self-gratification as an end; in other words, that it consists in committing the will to the impulses of the sensibility, to the desires, emotions, feelings, and passions, instead of committing it to the good of being in general, in obedience to the law of the reason, or to the law of God as it is revealed in the reason. Selfishness is the intention to gratify self as an end. It is the preference of self-interest to other and higher interests.

II. *What is not implied in disobedience to the law of God.*

I. It does not necessarily imply an intention *to do wrong*. The thing intended in selfishness is to gratify self as an end. This is wrong; but it is not necessary to its being wrong, that the wrongness should be aimed at or intended. There may be a state of malicious feeling in a moral agent that would be gratified by the commission of sin. A sinner may have knowingly and intentionally made war upon God and man, and this may have induced a state of the sensibility so hostile to God, as that the sinner has a malicious desire to offend and abuse God, to violate his law, and trample upon his authority. This state of feeling may take the control of the will, and he may deliberately intend to violate

the law and to do what God hates, for the purpose of gratifying this feeling. This, however, it will be seen, is not malevolence, or willing either natural or moral evil, for its own sake, but as a means of self-gratification. It is selfishness, and not malevolence.

But in the vast majority of instances, where the law is violated and sin committed, the wrong of the doing is no part of the sinner's aim or intention. He intends to gratify himself at all events. This intention is wrong. But it is not an intention to do wrong, nor is the wrong in any case the end upon which the intention terminates. There is a great mistake often entertained upon this subject. Many seem to think that they do not sin unless they intend to sin. The important truth, that sin belongs only to the ultimate intention, than which nothing is more true or more important, has been perverted in this manner. It has been assumed by some that they had not done wrong, nor intended wrong, because they were conscious that the wrong was not the end at which they aimed. "I did not intend the wrong," say they, "and therefore I did not sin." Now here is a fatal mistake, and a total perversion of the great and important truth, that sin and holiness belong only to the ultimate intention.

2. Disobedience to the moral law does not imply that wrong, or sin, or in other words, disobedience is ever intended as an end, or for its own sake. Gross mistakes have been fallen into upon this subject. Sinners have been represented as loving sin, and as choosing it for its own sake. They have also been represented as having a natural and constitutional craving or appetite for sin, such as carnivorous animals have for flesh. Now, if this craving existed, still it would not prove that sin is sought or intended for its own sake. I have a constitutional desire for food and drink. My desires terminate on these objects, that is, they are desired for their own sake. But they never are, and never can be chosen for their own sake, or as an end. They are chosen as a means of gratifying the desire, or may be chosen as a means of glorifying God, or both. Just so, if it were true that sinners have a constitutional appetency for sin, the sin would be desired for its own sake, or as an end, but could never be chosen except as a means of self-gratification.

But again. It is not true that sinners have a constitutional appetency and craving for sin. They have a constitutional appetite or desire for a great many things around them. They crave food, and drink, and knowledge. So did our first parents; and when these desires were strongly excited, they were a powerful temptation to prohibited indulgence. Eve craved the fruit, and the knowledge which she supposed she might attain by partaking of it. These desires led her to seek their indulgence in a prohibited manner. She desired and craved the food and the knowledge, and not the sin of eating. So, all sinners have constitutional and artificial appetites and desires enough. But not one of them is a craving for sin, unless it be the exception already named, when the mind has come into such relations to God, as to have a malicious satisfaction in abusing him. But this is not natural to man, and if it ever exists, is only brought about by rejecting great light, and inducing a most terrible perversion of the sensibility. But such cases are extremely rare; whereas, it has been strangely and absurdly maintained that all sinners, in consequence of the fall of Adam, have a sinful constitution, or one that craves sin, as it craves food and drink. This is false in fact, and absurd in philosophy, and wholly inconsistent with scripture, as we shall see, when we make moral depravity the special subject of attention.

The facts are these: men have constitutional desires, appetites, and passions. These are not sinful in themselves; they all terminate on their respective objects. Selfishness, or sin, consists in choosing the gratification of these desires as an end, or in preferring their gratification to other and higher interests. This choice or intention is sinful. But, as I have said, sin is not the object intended, but self-gratification is the end intended.

Again: that disobedience to the law of God does not imply the choice of sin, or the wrong for its own sake, has been shown in a former lecture. But I must so far repeat as to say, that it is impossible that sin should be chosen as an end. Sin belongs to the ultimate intention. It either consists in, and is identical with, selfish intention, or it is the moral element or attribute of that intention. If it be identical with it, then to intend sin as an end, or for its own sake, were to intend my own intention as an end. If sin be but the moral element, quality, or attribute of the intention, then to intend sin as an end, I must intend an attribute of my intention as an end. Either alternative is absurd and impossible.

3. Disobedience to moral law does not imply, that the wrongness or sinfulness of the intention, is so much as thought of at the time the intention is formed. The sin not only need not be intended, but it is not essential to sin, that the moral character of the intention be at all taken into consideration, or so much as thought of at the time the intention is formed. The sinner ought to will the good of being. This he knows, and if he be a moral agent, which is implied in his being a sinner, he cannot but assume this as a first truth, that he ought to will the good of being in general, and not his own gratification, as an end. This truth he always and necessarily takes with him, in the form of an assumption of a universal truth. He knows, and cannot but know, that he ought to will the good of God and of the universe, as an end, instead of willing his own good as an end. Now, this being necessarily assumed by him as a first truth, it is no more essential to sin, that he should think at the time that a particular intention is or would be sinful, than it is essential to murder, that the law of causality should be distinctly before the mind, as an object of attention, when the murderer aims the fatal weapon at his victim. Murder consists in a selfish intention to kill a human being. I point a pistol at my neighbour's head with an intention to gratify a spirit of revenge or of avarice, or some such desire, by taking his life. I am, however, so exasperated, or so intent on self-gratification, as not to think of the law of God, or of God himself, or of my obligation to do otherwise. Now, am I hereby justified? No, indeed. I no more think of that law of causality which alone will secure the effect at which I aim, than I do of my obligation, and of the moral character of my intention. Nevertheless, I assume, and cannot but assume, those first truths at the moment of my intention. The first truths of reason are those, as has been repeatedly said, that are necessarily known and assumed by all moral agents. Among these truths are those of causality, moral obligation, right, wrong, human free agency, &c. Now, whether I think of these truths or not at every moment, I cannot but assume their truth at all times. In every endeavour to do anything, I assume the truth of causality, and generally without being conscious of any such assumption. I also assume the truth of my own free agency, and equally without being conscious of the assumption. I also assume that happiness is a good, for I am aiming to realize it to myself. I assume that it is valuable to myself, and cannot but assume that it is equally valuable to others. I cannot but assume also, that it ought to be chosen because of its intrinsic value, and that it ought to be chosen

impartially, that is, that the good of each should be chosen according to its relative or intrinsic value. This is assuming my obligation to will it as an end, and is also assuming the rightness of such willing, and the wrongness of its opposite.

Now every moral agent does, and must, and this fact constitutes him a moral agent, assume all these, and divers other truths, at every moment of his moral agency. He assumes them all, one as really and as much as the other, and they are all assumed as first truths; and in the great majority of instances, the mind is not more taken up with the consciousness of the assumption, or with attending to those truths, as a subject of thought, than it is with the first truths, that space exists and is infinite, that duration exists and is infinite. It is of the highest importance, that this should be distinctly understood--that sin does not imply, that the moral character of an act or intention should be distinctly before the mind, at the time of its commission. Indeed, it is perfectly common for sinners to act thoughtlessly, as they say, that is, without reflecting upon the moral character of their intentions. But hereby they are not justified. Indeed, this very fact is often but an evidence and an instance of extreme depravity. Think you than an angel could sin thoughtlessly? Could he form a selfish intention without reflection, or thinking of its wickedness? Sinners, in sinning thoughtlessly, give the highest evidence of their desperate voluntary depravity. A sinner may become so hardened, and his conscience so stupified, that he may go on from day to day without thinking of God, of moral obligation, of right or wrong; and yet his sin and his guilt are real. He does and must know, and assume all these truths at every step, just as he assumes his own existence, the law of causality, his own liberty or free agency, &c. None of these need to be made the object of the mind's attention: they are known and need not to be learned. They are first truths, and we cannot act at all without assuming them. They are in the reason.

4. Disobedience to moral law does not necessarily imply an outwardly immoral life. A sinner may outwardly conform to every precept of the Bible, from selfish motives, or with a selfish intention, to gratify himself, to secure his own reputation here, and even his salvation hereafter. This is sin; but it is not outward immorality, but, on the contrary, is outward morality.

5. Disobedience to moral law does not necessarily imply feelings of enmity to God or to man. The will may be set upon self-indulgence, and yet as the sinner does not apprehend God's indignation against him, and his opposition to him, on that account, he may have no hard feelings, or feelings of hatred to God. Should God reveal to him his abhorrence of him on account of his sins, his determination to punish him for them, the holy sovereignty with which he will dispose of him; in this case, the sinner might, and probably would, feel deeply malicious and revengeful feelings towards God. But sin does not consist in these feelings, nor necessarily imply them.

6. Sin, or disobedience to moral law, does not imply, in any instance, a sinful nature; or a constitution in itself sinful. Adam and Eve sinned. Holy angels sinned. Certainly in their case, sin or disobedience, did not imply a sinful nature or constitution. Adam and Eve, certainly, and holy angels also, must have sinned by yielding to temptation. The constitutional desire being excited by the perception of their correlated objects, they

consented to prefer their own gratification to obedience to God, in other words, to make their gratification an end. This was their sin. But in this there was no sin in their constitutions, and no other tendency to sin than this, that these desires, when strongly excited, are a temptation to unlawful indulgence.

It has been strangely and absurdly assumed, that sin in action implies a sinful nature. But this is contrary to fact and to sound philosophy, as well as contrary to the Bible, which we shall see in its proper place.

As it was with Adam and Eve, so it is with every sinner. There is not, there cannot be, sin in the nature of the constitution. But there are constitutional appetites and passions, and when these are strongly excited, they are a strong temptation or inducement to the will, to seek their gratification as an ultimate end. This, as I have said, is sin, and nothing else is or can be sin. It is selfishness. Under its appropriate head, I shall show that the nature or constitution of sinners has become physically depraved or diseased, and that as a consequence, the appetites and passions are more easily excited, and are more clamorous and despotic in their demands; and that, therefore, the constitution of man in its present state, tends more strongly than it otherwise would do, to sin. But to affirm that the constitution is in itself sinful, is worse than nonsense; it is contradicting God's own definition of sin. It is to stultify the whole question of morality and religion. But this we shall more fully see in a future lecture.