

THE CRIMINALITY OF TRANSGRESSION: SINNERS ARE REBELS NOT VICTIMS

Jesse Morrell

(A section from the booklet “Free Will & Conscience”)

If man did not have free will, but had a nature that did not allow for contingent or alternative choices, it would follow that punishment could not be justly executed upon anyone for their choices. Those who believe in punishing different types of choices, like the choice of being selfish instead of loving, are themselves presupposing the existence of contingent or alternative choice, that is, they themselves are assuming the freedom of the will. Unless they assumed the existence of free choices they could not affirm the justice of punishing choices.

Any man who has ever regretted his past actions, or had remorse over his past sins, has presupposed the freedom of the will. Regret and remorse necessarily assume the contingent element of reality, consciously or unconsciously affirming the contingency of moral action. If this were not so, regret and remorse could never exist in the minds of men. Conversion requires such regret and remorse, so conversion requires the presupposition or belief (*conscious or unconscious*) of the freedom of the will. All men assume it, especially all converted men, since it is absolutely necessary for conversion, necessary for the acknowledgment of personal responsibility and guilt.

Winkie Pratney explains how all those who have ever been angry with themselves presupposed the liberty of will, assuming the power of contingent or alternative choice. “The reason you were angry with yourself was that you knew you were capable of better things, but did not do them.” Likewise, “God is angry with the wicked every day because He knows what they are capable of and to what depth they have fallen.”⁴⁷

Jesus Christ taught that punishment would be inflicted upon the unwilling, not upon the unable. Jesus said, “But those mine *enemies*, which *would* not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me.” (Luke 19:27). The enemies of God are those who are willfully in rebellion against His reign. And it is in that willfulness that they rightly deserve punishment. Jesus did *not* say, “But those mine enemies, which *could* not have me reign over them...slay them before me.” But rather, it was those who *would* not have Jesus reign in their lives that He will righteously and justly slay on Judgment Day.

The justice of punishing disobedience necessitates the existence of the possibility of obedience. Only what is voluntarily chosen, and not what is forced by nature or necessity, is justly punishable. The same injustice that would exist if someone was punished for the color of their skin would also exist if someone was punished for some sort of necessitated or involuntary sin. One can be justly punished for their voluntary character, but cannot be justly punished for their involuntary constitution.

Justin Martyr said, "Every created being is so constituted as to be capable of vice and virtue. For he can do nothing praiseworthy, if he

had not the power of turning either way." And, "unless we suppose man has the power to choose the good and refuse the evil, no one can be accountable for any action whatever."⁴⁸ Tertullian said, "No reward can be justly bestowed, no punishment can be justly inflicted, upon him who is good or bad by necessity, and not by his own choice."⁴⁹ Origen said, "The soul does not incline to either part out of necessity, for then neither vice nor virtue could be ascribed to it; nor would its choice of virtue deserve reward; nor its declination to vice punishment." And again, "How could God require that of man which he [man] had not power to offer Him?"⁵⁰

True total moral depravity is when a sinner never chooses to do rightly or benevolently, but only wickedly or selfishly. Those who never choose to do rightly, which are all men prior to conversion to Christ, are totally morally depraved. But moral depravity is not moral inability; it is moral unwillingness to use moral ability rightly. Depravity of constitution could not be depravity of character. Character and capabilities must not be confused; character and constitution are not identical. Character does not consist in your faculties, but in the usage of those faculties. Constitutional inability would not be, could not be, and is not sin. Only unwillingness to do rightly, when there is the capability of doing rightly, is sin, sin that is punishable by eternal torment.

Sinners sin because they *want* to, not because they *have* to, and that is where the criminality of transgression consists. Sinners are *criminals* not *cripples*. Sinners are criminals in their will, criminals through their choice, not victims of their parents, victims of their birth, or victims of their nature (*constitution or faculties*). Sinners are criminals because they sin when they do not have to sin. Sinners are sinners because they rebel against God when they could surrender to and obey God. Sinners are criminals because they sin, and they sin because they want to, when, in fact, they don't have to. A sinner is a sinner by choice, not by birth or by necessity. A sinner is, therefore, a *rebel* and not a *victim*, a *criminal* and not a *cripple*, with nobody to blame for his sin but himself. On the Day of Judgment, God will not blame Adam or our nature for our sin, God will blame us and us alone for our sin, because sin is a choice of free will, and we alone are in control of our free will.

A man's guilt is proportioned to his degree of ability, with the man being guilty only to the extent that he was capable of doing better. Justice does not allow guilt to exceed ability; ability must always precede guilt. Capability determines responsibility, and responsibility determines accountability. Capability (*ability*), responsibility (*obligation*), and accountability (*judgment*) are in an inseparable relation with each other, so that none can exist if one does not exist; they equally limit each other. They are an inseparable chain that stands or falls together. One is not accountable unless he is responsible, and one is not responsible unless he is capable.

Gordon Olson said, "Sin is always a wrong voluntary attitude or purpose of life, or a wrong motive of heart. Sin is not a fixed something back of the will controlling its

actions. The will determines the nature of character . . . We are sinners simply because we choose to sin or live selfishly. We are never held accountable for what we are not the author of. Ability is always the measure of responsibility.”⁵¹

God calls all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30-31) and God blames them if they do not repent (Matt. 11:20, Matt. 23:37, Mk. 6:6, Lk. 7:30, 13:34, 14:17-18, 19:14, 19:27, Jn. 5:40, Rev. 2:21). This implies the free choice nature of repentance and the voluntary refusal or unwillingness that is required for impenitence. The impenitent have a wicked moral character or are in a rebellious condition by their personal voluntary choice. They utterly refuse to obey the gospel (Rom. 10:13, 2 Thess. 1:8). And for that very reason they are guilty, blameworthy, and are personally held responsible and accountable on the Day of Judgment.

Jesus rightly rebuked the unrepentant because they were unwilling; He did not cruelly rebuke the unable for not doing (Jn. 5:40). They were criminals who rightly needed rebuking, because they were unwilling, not because they were unable. Sinners are voluntarily unwilling, not constitutionally unable. Men cannot blame Adam, Eve, Satan, God, society, or nature for their sin and impenitence. Those who are unconverted are unconverted not because of God or anything else, but because of themselves, because they “would not come” unto Jesus that they “might have life” (Jn. 5:40), because they were too proud to seek after God (Ps. 10:4) even though God has revealed His existence to all men through natural revelation (Rom. 1:20). Sinners have nothing but their own will to blame for their rebellion against the law of God and for their refusal to seek after Him.

A. W. Tozer taught this profound truth in a simple manner, “What man ought to do, he can do.”⁵² Men are accountable only to their obligations. A man cannot be accountable for that which he was not obligated to do, and our obligations are respecting our abilities only, “with all thy”. A man cannot be obligated to do that which he was unable to do. Therefore, those who should do better can do better, and those who can do better should do better. Account-ability is the giving of account of one’s use of ability, being accountable in accordance to one’s capabilities. You are accountable only for what you can do, and what you can do you are accountable for.

A man determines his heart, that is, he determines his will or intention (1 Ki. 6:61; Zech. 7:10; Eze. 18:31 Ps. 119:112). The inward moral character of a man is totally voluntary, determined by the man himself (Job 11:14; Ecc. 11:14; Matt. 23:26; Rom. 6:12), and a man’s heart determines his conduct (Matt. 12:35; 15:19; Lk. 6:45). Men are voluntarily servants of sin. Jesus taught that those who voluntarily choose to sin are servants of sin (Jn. 8:34). Paul taught that those who choose to obey sin are servants of sin (Rom. 6:16). It is not that they sin because they are first servants of sin, but they are servants of sin because they first voluntarily sin, because they first choose to obey sin. Likewise, those who voluntarily yield and present themselves to God (Rom. 6:13, 19; 12:1) are now voluntarily servants of righteousness (Rom. 6:16-20). Men are dead *in* sin (Rom. 7:9; Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13) or they are dead *to* sin (1 Pet. 2:24) by voluntary choice. Being dead *in* sin and dead *to* sin are voluntary moral states (Lk. 9:23; 1 Cor.

15:31, Col 2:13), or are voluntary moral characters, determined by free will. “Dead in sin” and “dead to sin” are reflections upon the moral character of man not the moral constitution of man. Dead in sin and dead to sin are states of the will, being derived from the will, not from the nature or constitution. If these moral states were not voluntary states of the will, these states could not have moral character, and if they have no moral character, they could not be moral states at all. They are voluntary states, and therefore men are accountable for them.

Likewise to be “carnally minded” (Rom. 8:6) is to intentionally be “minding the flesh” (Rom. 8:5), which is choosing or purposing to serve the flesh. And to be “spiritually minded” (Rom. 8:6) is to purposely be serving the Spirit, or voluntarily choosing to walk after the spiritual. The decision to be either fleshly or spiritually purposed is made by the mind. That is why repentance is a change of mind, when a person makes up their mind to sin no more, when a person changes their mind about sinning. And because those who are carnally minded choose to mind the flesh, they are utterly responsible and damnable for choosing to be in that condition, they justly deserve hell for being carnally minded.

Sinners are the authors of their own sin, the creators of their own character, and the causes of their own rebellion. All sinners voluntarily choose to sin, to abuse their ability; and to do what they know is wrong. Sinners are horrible criminals, not helpless cripples. And therein is the criminality of transgression, the guilt of rebellion, and the justice of eternal damnation.

*47 Winkie Pratney, *The Nature and Character of God*, Bethany House Publishing, 1988, p. 167

*48 Justin the Martyr; *Doctrine of the Will* by Asa Mahan, p. 61, published by Truth in Heart

*49 Turtullian; *Doctrine of the Will* by Asa Mahan, p. 61, published by Truth in Heart

*50 Origen; *Doctrine of the Will* by Asa Mahan, p. 62, published by Truth in Heart

*51 Gordon Olson: *The Truth Shall Set You Free*, p. 71-72

*52 A. W. Tozer; Sermon on *SermonIndex.net*