

THE CONDITION OF THE MORAL CHARACTER OF SINNERS, AND THE CONDITION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL FACULTIES OF SINNERS

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

We must distinguish between what sinners *can do* and what sinners *actually do*. All sinners can obey God but, until conversion, they don't obey God. The wicked are totally *morally* depraved by choice, that is, they never do anything righteously because what they do (even if they pray and read their bibles) is done supremely selfishly and not for the glory of God. The bible describes the moral condition of unconverted sinners as being totally and completely morally depraved, as never doing any good at all, entirely destitute of all virtue, bankrupt of all real righteousness, and deplete of all true holiness (Matt. 6:22-24; 7:17-18; Lk. 11:34-36; Rom. 3:10-18; 2 Cor. 5:17; Tit. 1:15-16; Jas. 3:11-12).

But total *moral* depravity is not synonymous with *constitutional* or *metaphysical* inability; inability meaning that the will is no longer free to make the contrary choice, that the faculty of the will is crippled or impaired. An important distinction must be made between the condition of the *moral character* of sinners and the condition of the *constitutional faculties* of sinners. Moral character and constitutional capabilities must not be confused; they are not identical. For a sound theology, one must clearly distinguish between that which is constitutional or metaphysical and that which is moral or ethical. Moral depravity is not the absence of moral ability. Moral depravity is the voluntary abuse of moral ability.

L. D. McCabe said, "In self-originating volition we locate the origin of [moral] character."³⁴ Julius Mueller said, "Character is formed by internal decisions. Moral Character is of moral significance only so far as it has been produced by an act which is simply internal, that is the free inclination of the will."³⁵ Moral character absolutely cannot exist without moral agency, and moral agency absolutely cannot exist without constitutional faculties, specifically, as relating to this discourse, the freedom of the will (*and conscience*). Both the morally virtuous and the morally depraved conditions of men, which make up their moral character, are dependent upon the functional faculty, or uninjured freedom of the will. Where this freedom does not exist, moral agency, moral responsibility, and therefore moral character, good or bad, cannot exist. And where moral character does not exist, moral accountability cannot exist.

Individuals that are totally morally depraved still maintain the ability of choosing the good over evil; they still have the faculty of freewill. Moral depravity is not a crippled faculty, but it is the abuse, or improper function, of an existing, functioning faculty. Sin is not the inability to do right, but is an abuse of the liberty of the ability; sin is an unwillingness to use the faculty of the will rightly, to use the gift of free will

according to the intended purpose of the faculty Creator and Designer. Moral depravity is depravity of *character* not of *constitution*.

God has given all men the gift of free will and the gift of conscience so that man can choose to have the same moral character God chooses to have. God Himself uses His free will to obey His own Eternal and Divine Conscience (Gen 3:22, 1 John 4:8, 1 John 4:16). Free will is a gift from God so that man could rightly choose the good over the evil. Man has no strength or ability *of his own*, but only the strength or ability God *supplies*, namely free will granted at creation. Sin consists in voluntarily choosing wrongly, opting for the evil over the good. Man could not be capable of evil if he were not capable of good; neither could man be capable of good if he were not capable of evil. True virtue and true blameworthiness consist in that which is voluntarily chosen, not in that which is necessitated. That which is necessitated cannot have moral character, but moral character can only be in connection with voluntarily choices, which choices are morally right or morally wrong. Moral character is derived from choices, and choices are derived from free will.

Inability to do right is not, and could not be, sin, for inability to do good does not allow for the existence of character or guilt; it does not allow for voluntary transgression in which sin alone consists. Inability to do good would inevitably be the inability to sin, for sin is the voluntary choice, or voluntary violation, of God's reasonable and good law (1 John 3:4). Sin consists in the voluntary moral choice to choose the evil over the option of good, in the voluntary attitude of the heart, in the voluntary moral quality of the intention. Inability to sin would inevitably be the inability to be virtuous, for virtue consists in voluntarily choosing the good over the option of evil. What a man does out of inability a man does involuntarily, and moral character is derived from voluntarily choices alone. Therefore, inability for vice means inability for virtue, and inability for virtue means inability for vice, because virtue and vice are voluntary choices. Character (*good or bad*) cannot be derived from anything involuntary.

So heart obedience is possible only insofar as heart disobedience is possible. Voluntary submission is possible only insofar as voluntary rebellion is possible. The possibility of one cannot exist without the possibility of the other. A man is capable of being good only insofar as he is capable of being evil, and he is capable of being evil only insofar as he is capable of being good. God gave man free will, with the power to disobey, so that man could genuinely obey from his own heart, so a man could genuinely love with free will.

Since sin does not consist in the inability to choose good over evil, but rather in the voluntarily choosing of evil over the good, an unwillingness to do rightly, and not an inability to do rightly, sinners truly *deserve* hell, not because of any involuntary inability, but rather because of their voluntary unwillingness. They are criminals through their own will, and not cripples by nature or victims of Adam. They are sinners *by choice*, not by birth, by constitution, by nature, or anything else external to their own free will. Their own will is the reason for their sin (Isa. 14:13-14; Lk. 19:14, 27; Jn. 5:40). They are rebels who *choose* to rebel (Ps. 5:10; Isa. 1:2; Eze. 2:3). They have chosen to *become*

sinners or to *make themselves* sinners (Gen. 6:12, Ex. 32:7, Deut. 9:12, Deut. 32:5, Jdg. 2:19, Hos. 9:9, Ps. 14:2-3, Isa. 53:6, Ecc. 7:29 Rom. 3:23). Men *choose* to *become* dead in their sins (Rom. 5:12, Rom. 5:14, Rom. 7:9, Rom. 7:11, Col. 2:13).

Charles Finney said that this was “a very different view of total [moral] depravity from” those “which regards depravity as physical, or constitutional, or as belonging to the substance of the body or mind.” But rather, “all depravity” is “voluntary, as consisting in voluntary transgression. As the sinner’s own act. Something of his own creation. That over which he has a perfect control, and for which he is entirely responsible.”³⁶

And so it must be distinctly understood that total moral depravity is respecting moral character, but it is not at all any sort of total inability respecting the capabilities of the faculties of the personality. Total moral depravity is rather the utter and absolute unwillingness to choose good over evil. A man who is totally morally depraved still has the capacity of good, just as the man totally morally righteous has the capacity of evil, because righteousness and wickedness are respecting voluntary choices or voluntary character and not at all the capabilities or incapacities of the faculties of the personality.

The wicked and the righteous both have the faculty of free will imbedded in their personality, and it must exist as long as they themselves exist. Therefore, the righteous man can turn away from his righteousness and choose sin (Eze. 18:24), and “the wicked” can “turn from all his sins” and choose righteousness (Eze. 18:21). Jesus taught that a man can make up his mind to disobey and then later change his mind and choose to obey, and a man can make up his mind to obey and then later change his mind and choose to disobey (Matt. 21:28-30). The character, or choices, of an individual can always change, because the faculty of the will always remains intact and functional, always operating under the law of liberty, always possessing moral freedom.

A man is unable only in the sense that he is unwilling, but not in the sense that he does not possess the needed and necessary faculties. He is always free to choose contrary to his previous choice. If this were not true, neither falling from a state of perfection (*like Lucifer, Adam, or Eve*), nor recovering from a fallen state of sin (*like the converted*), could be possible at all. Neither falling, nor converting, nor backsliding, would be, or could be, possible at all, if a man could not choose contrary to his previous choice, if the faculty of the will was not functional.

But a man is unable only in that he is unwilling, but not in that he is incapable in respect to his faculty. He is unable only because of his character, because of his choices, because of his will, not because of his constitutional faculties or natural capabilities. A man who willingly chooses sin cannot willingly choose righteousness, as he is unwilling to choose righteousness while he is willingly choosing sin (Rom. 8:5-8), and a man who willingly chooses righteousness cannot willingly choose sin, as he is unwilling to choose sin, while he is willingly choosing righteousness (1 Jn. 3:8). But the faculty of the will is always free to choose, always maintaining the power of contrary choice. The faculty of the will can, at all times, either submit itself to the sensibilities, that is, to the lusts of the flesh (1 Jn. 2:16), or to the truth and instruction of God revealed to the intelligence by the

Spirit of grace (Gal. 5:16; Tit. 2:11). The will is free because it always has these two opposite choices, to do what *feels good for self*, or to do what one *knows is good for others*.

Since sin does not consist in the inability to choose good over evil, total moral depravity is not, and could not be, total inability or a crippled constitutional faculty. Total moral depravity simply could not exist without moral ability. Character is not capabilities. That which is constitutional and that which is ethical are completely separate in nature. A proper distinction between the two is vital to a biblically sound and accurate theological view of sin, sinners, God, and His government.

*34 L. D. McCabe; *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies a Necessity*, p. 68

*35 Julius Mueller; *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies a Necessity* by L. D. McCabe, p. 76

*36 Charles Finney, *Principles of Victory*, p. 125, published by Bethany House