

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN'S IMPOTENCE

Chapter 11 EXPOSITION

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Transcript

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EXPOSITION

(Intended chiefly for preachers)

THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS should have made it clear that the subject of the sinner's moral impotence is far more than an academic one, more than a flight into theological metaphysics. Rather is it a truth of divine revelation—a unique one—for it will not be found enunciated in any of the leading religions of antiquity, like Zoroastrianism, Buddhism or Confucianism. Nor do we remember finding any trace of it in the poets and philosophers of early Greece. It is truth which is made prominent in the Scriptures, and therefore must be given a place in the pulpit if it is to declare "all the counsel of God." It is closely bound up with the law and the gospel, the great end of the former being to demonstrate its reality, of the latter to make known the remedy. It is one of the chief battering rams which the Spirit directs against the insensate pride of the human heart, for belief in his own capabilities is the foundation on which man's self-righteousness rests. It is the one doctrine which above all others reveals the catastrophic effects of the fall and shuts up the sinner to the sovereign mercy of God as his only hope. GENERALIZATION NOT SUFFICIENT

It is not sufficient for the preacher to generalize and speak of "the ruin which sin has wrought" and affirm that man is "totally depraved"; such expressions convey no adequate concept to the modern mind. It is necessary that he should particularize and show from Holy Writ that "they that are in the flesh cannot please God." His task is to paint fallen human nature in its true colors and not deceive by flattery. The state of the natural man is far, far worse than he has any consciousness of. Though he knows he is not perfect, though in serious moments he is aware that all is not well with him, yet he has no realization whatever that his condition is desperate and irremediable so far as all self-help is concerned. A great many people regard religion as a medicine for the soul, and suppose that if it is taken regularly it will ensure their salvation; that if they do this and that and avoid the other, all will be well in the end. They are totally oblivious to the fact that they are "without strength" and can no more perform spiritual duties than the Ethiopian can change his skin or the leopard his spots. It is a matter of first importance that the moral

inability of fallen man should be understood by all. It concerns both young and old, illiterate and educated; therefore each should have right views on the issue. It is most essential that the unsaved should be made aware not only that they are unable to do what God requires of them, but also why they are unable. They should be told the fact that it is impossible for them to "fulfill all righteousness," but also the cause of this impossibility. Their - self-sufficiency cannot be undermined while they believe they have it in their own power to perform God's commands and to comply with the terms of His gospel. Nevertheless they must not be left with the impression that their impotence is a calamity for which they are not to blame, a deprivation for which they are to be pitied; for they are endowed with faculties suited to respond to law and gospel alike. A mistake concerning either of these truths—man's impotence and man's responsibility—is likely to have a fatal consequence. On the other hand, as long as men imagine they have it in their own power to perform their whole duty or do all that God requires of them in order for them to obtain pardon and eternal life, they feel at ease and are apt to neglect to diligently apply themselves to the performance of that duty. They are not at all likely to pray in earnest or to watch against sin with any anxiety. They neither see the need of God's working in them "both to will and to do of his good pleasure" nor the necessity of their "working out their own salvation with fear and trembling." To waken men out of this dream of self-sufficiency the Saviour has given such alarming declarations as these: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3); "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). And to cut off effectually from the unregenerate all hope of obtaining mercy on the ground of the supposed acceptableness of anything they have done or can do until created in Christ Jesus unto good works, His apostle declared, "They that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8). On the other hand, should the unregenerate be allowed to suppose they are devoid of those faculties which are necessary for knowing God's will and doing those things which are pleasing in His sight, such a delusion is likely to prove equally fatal to them. For in that case how could they ever be convinced of either sin or righteousness: of sin in themselves and of righteousness in God? How could they ever perceive that the ways of the Lord are just and their own unjust? If in fact the natural man had no kind of capacity any more than has the horse or mule to love and serve God, to repent and believe the gospel, then the pressing of such duties upon him would be most unreasonable, nor could their noncompliance be at all criminal. Accordingly we find that after our Lord informed Nicodemus of the necessity of man's being born again before he could "see" or believe to the saving of his soul, He declared that he was "condemned already" for not believing (John 3:18). Then He cleared up the whole matter by saying, "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved" (vv. 19-20). CLEAR DISTINCTIONS NECESSARY

From these and similar verses well-instructed scholars of the Word of God have been led to draw a sharp distinction between the absence of natural faculties and the lack of moral ability, the latter being the essence of moral depravity. The absence of natural faculties clears one from blame, for one who is physically blind is not blameworthy because he cannot see, nor is an idiot to be condemned because he is devoid of rationality. Moral inability is of a totally different species, for it proceeds from an evil heart, consisting of a culpable failure to use in the right way those talents with which God has endowed us. The unregenerate man who refuses to obtain any knowledge of God through reading His Word is justly chargeable with such neglect; but the saint is not guilty because he fails to arrive at a perfect knowledge of God, for such an attainment lies beyond the reach of his faculties. Some may object to what has just been pointed out and say that this is a distinction of no consequence; inability is inability; what a man cannot do he cannot do; whether it be owing to a lack of faculties or the absence of a good heart, it comes to the same thing. All this is true so far as the end is concerned, but not so far as the criminality. If an evil

disposition were a valid excuse, then all the evil in the world would be excusable. Because sin cannot be holiness, is it the less evil? Because the sinner cannot, at the same time, be a saint, is he no more a sinner? Because an evil-minded man cannot get rid of his evil mind while he has no inclination to do so, is he only to be pitied like one who labors under a misconception? True also, this distinction affords no relief to one who is dead in sin, nor does it inform him how he can by his own effort become alive to God; nevertheless, it adds to his condemnation and makes him aware of his awful state. For vindicating the justice of God, for magnifying His grace, for laying low the haughtiness of man, moral inability is a distinction of vital consequence, however hateful it may be to the ungodly. Unless the line is drawn between excusing a wicked heart and pitying a palsied hand, between moral depravity and the lack of moral faculties, the whole Word of God and all His ways with man must appear invalid, shrouded in midnight darkness. Deny this distinction, and God's requiring perfect obedience from such imperfect creatures must seem altogether unreasonable, His condemning to everlasting misery every one who does evil (when doing evil is what no man can avoid) excessively harsh. But let men be made aware of the horrible plague of their hearts, let the distinct difference between the absence of moral faculties and the sinful misuse of them be seen and felt, and every mouth will be stopped and all the world become guilty before God. Though at first it may seem to the preacher that the proclamation of human impotence defeats his ends and works against the highest interest of his hearers, yet if God is pleased to bless his fidelity to the truth (and faith may always count upon such blessing), it will do the hearer good in his latter end, for it will drive him out from the hiding place of falsehood, it will bring him to realize his need of fleeing for refuge to the glorious hope set before him in the gospel. By pulling down strongholds, casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against God, the way is paved for bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. To see oneself "without strength" and at the same time "without excuse" is indeed humiliating, yet this must be seen by the sinner—before either the justice of the divine law or one's utter helplessness and conviction of guilt—as the chief prerequisite for embracing Christ as one's all-sufficient Saviour. It will thus be seen that there are two chief dangers concerning which the preacher must be on his guard while endeavoring to expound this doctrine. First, while pressing the utter inability of the natural man to meet the just claims of God or even so much as perform a single spiritual duty, he must not overthrow or even weaken the equally evident fact of man's moral responsibility. Second, in his zeal to leave unimpaired the moral agency and personal accountability of the sinner, he must not repudiate his total depravity and death in trespasses and sins. This is no easy task, and here as everywhere the minister is made to feel his need of seeking wisdom from above. Yet let it be pointed out that prayer is not designed as a substitute for hard work and study, but rather as a preparative for the same. Difficulties are not to be shunned, but overcome by diligent effort; but diligent effort can only be rightly directed and effectually employed as divine grace enables, and that grace is to be expectantly sought. Probably it is best to begin by considering the fact of man's impotence. At first this may be presented in general terms and in its broad outlines by showing that the thrice holy God can require nothing less than holiness from His creatures, that He can by no means tolerate any sin in them. The standard which God has set before men is the moral law which demands perfect and perpetual obedience; being spiritual it enjoins holiness of character as well as conduct, purity of heart as well as acts. Such a standard fallen man cannot reach, such demands he cannot meet, as is demonstrated from the entire history of the Jews under that law. Next it should be pointed out that the Lord Jesus did not lower that standard or modify God's commands, but uniformly and insistently upheld the one and pressed the other, as is unmistakably clear in Matthew 5:17-48; nevertheless He repeatedly affirmed the moral impotence of fallen man (John 5:44; 6:44; 8:43). This same twofold teaching is repeated by the apostles, especially in the epistles to the Romans and Corinthians. From the general we may descend to the particular and show

the extent of man's impotence and depravity. Sin has so ruined the whole of his being that the understanding is darkened, the heart corrupted, the will perverted, each detail being proved and illustrated from Scripture. Then in summing up this solemn aspect, appeal may be made to that word of Christ's where He declared not merely that there were many things (or even some things) man could not do without His enablement, but that without Him man could do nothing" (John 15:5)—nothing good, nothing acceptable to God. If man could prepare himself to turn to God, or turn of himself after the Holy Spirit has prepared him, he could do much. But since it is God who works in us "both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13), He is the One who first implants the desire and then gives the power to fulfill it. Not only must the understanding be so enlightened as to discern the good from the evil, but the heart has to be changed so as to prefer the good before the evil. Next it is well to show clearly the nature of man's inability: what it does not consist of (the lack of faculties suited to the performance of duty) and what it does consist of. Care needs to be taken and arguments given to show that man's inability is moral rather than physical, voluntary rather than compulsory, criminal rather than innocent. After this has been done at some length, confirmation may be obtained by an appeal to the hearer's own experience. If honest he must acknowledge that his own consciousness testifies to the fact that he sins willingly and therefore willfully, and that his conscience registers condemnation upon him. The very facts that we sin freely and that conscience accuses us show we ought to have avoided it. Whatever line a man takes in attempting to justify his own wrongdoing, he promptly forsakes it whenever his fellowmen wrong him. He never argues that they were unable to do otherwise, nor does he excuse them on the ground of their inheriting a corrupt nature from Adam! Moreover, in the hour of remorse, the man who has squandered his substance and wrecked his health does not even excuse himself, but freely owns "What a fool I have been! There is no one to blame but myself." The impotence of the natural man to choose God for his portion is greater than that of an ape to reason like an Isaac Newton, yet there is this vital difference between the two: the inability of the former is a criminal one, that of the latter is not so because of its native and original incapacity. Man's moral inability lies not in the lack of capacity but in lack of desire. One incurs no guilt when there is a willingness of mind and a desire of heart to do the thing commanded but no capacity to carry it out. But where there is capacity (competent faculties) but unwillingness, there is guilt—wherever disaffection for God exists so does sin. Man's moral inability consists of an inveterate aversion for God, and it is this corruption of heart which alone has influence to prevent the proper use of the faculties with which he is endowed, and issues in acts of sin and rebellion against God. Even the bare knowledge of duty in all cases renders moral agents under obligation to do it: "To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (Jam. 4:17). It is very necessary that the preacher should be perfectly clear in his own mind that the moral impotence of the natural man is not of such a nature as to exempt him from God's claims or excuse him from the discharge of his duties. Some have drawn the erroneous conclusion that it is incongruous to call upon the unregenerate to perform spiritual duties. They say that only exhortations suited to the state of the unregenerate, such as the performance of civil righteousness, should be addressed to them. The truth is that a perfect heart and a perfect life are as much required as if men were not fallen creatures, and required of the greatest sinner as much as of the best saint. The righteous demands of the Most High must not be whittled down because of human depravity. David did not trim his exhortations to meet the inability of man: "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way" (Ps. 2:12). Isaiah did not keep back the command "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes" (1:16) though he knew the people were so corrupt they would not and could not comply. URGENT INVITATION OBLIGATORY

Nor should the preacher have the slightest hesitation in urging the unregenerate to use the means of grace and in declaring it is men's certain duty to employ them. The divine ordinances of hearing and

reading the Word, of praying and conversing with God's people, are thereby made a real test of men's hearts—as to whether they really desire salvation or despise it. Though God does renew men by His Spirit, yet He appoints the means by which sinners are to be subservient to such a work of grace. If they scorn and neglect the means, the blame is in themselves and not in God. If we are not willing to seek salvation, it proves we have no desire to find it; then in the day to come we shall be reproved as wicked and slothful servants (Matt. 25:26). The plea that man has no power will then mean nothing, for then the fact that his lack of power consists only in a lack of heart will appear with sunlight clearness, and he will be justly condemned for contempt of God's Word; his blood will be upon his own head for disregarding the warnings of God's servants. Yet so perverse is fallen human nature that men will argue, "What is the good of using the means when it does not lie in our power to give effect to them?" Even if there were no hope of success, God's command for us to use the means is sufficient to demand our compliance: "Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net" (Luke 5:5). I cannot infallibly promise a farmer who plows and sows that he will have a good crop, yet I may assure him that it is God's general way to bless the prudent and diligent. I cannot say to everyone who desires posterity, "Marry and you shall have children." But I may point out that if people refuse the ordinance of marriage they will never have any lawful children. The preacher needs to point out the grave peril incurred by those who spurn the help God proffers. Felix "trembled" (Acts 24:25), but he failed to act on his convictions. Unless the Lord is sought while He is "near" us (Isa. 55:6), He may finally abandon us. Every resistance to the impressions of the Spirit leaves the heart harder than it was before. After all that has been said it is scarcely necessary for us to press upon the preacher the tremendous importance of this doctrine. It displays as no other the perfect consistency of divine justice and grace. It reveals to the believer that his infirmities and imperfections are not the comforting cover-up of guilt that he would like to think they are. All moral infirmity, all lack of perfect holiness, is entirely his own fault, for which he should be deeply humbled. It shows sinners that their perdition is really altogether of themselves, for they are unwilling to be made clean. The kindest thing we can do for them is to shatter their self-righteous hopes, to make them realize both their utter helplessness and their entire inexcusableness. The high demands of God are to be pressed upon them with the design of bringing them to cry to Him to graciously work in them that which He requires. Genuine conviction of sin consists in a thorough realization of responsibility and guilt, of our inability and dependence upon divine grace. Nothing is so well calculated to produce that conviction, under the Spirit's blessing, as the faithful preaching of this unpalatable truth.

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