

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN'S IMPOTENCE

Chapter 4 ROOT

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Transcript

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ROOT

As no heart can sufficiently conceive, so no voice or pen can adequately portray the awful state of wretchedness and woe into which sin has cast guilty man. It has separated him from God and so has severed him from the only Source of holiness and true happiness. It has ruined him in spirit and soul and body. By the fall man not only plunged himself into a state of infinite guilt from which there is no deliverance unless sovereign grace unites him with the Mediator; by his apostasy man also lost his holiness and is wholly corrupt and under the dominion of dispositions or lusts which are directly contrary to God and His law (Rom. 8:7). The fall has brought man into love of sin and hatred of God. The corruption of man's being is so great and so entire that he will never truly repent or even have any right responses toward God and His law unless and until he is supernaturally renewed by the Holy Spirit.

CORRUPTION OF HUMAN NATURE If any reader is inclined to think we have painted too dark a picture or have exaggerated the case of the fallen creature, we ask him to carefully ponder the second half of Romans 7 and note how human nature is there represented as so totally depraved as to be utterly unable not merely to keep God's law perfectly, but to do anything agreeable with it. "The law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (vv. 14, 18, 23). How completely at variance is that language from the sentiments which prevail in Christendom today. Paul, that most eminent Christian, nothing behind the chief apostles, when he considered what he was in himself, confessed that he was "sold under sin." The apostle's phrase "in my flesh," as may be seen by tracing it through the New Testament, means "in me by nature." He was saying, "There is nothing in me naturally good." But before proceeding further let us seek to carefully define what is signified by the term "the natural man," or "man by nature." It does not mean the human nature itself, or man as a tripartite being of spirit and soul and body, for then we should include the Lord Jesus Christ, who truly and really assumed human nature, becoming the Son of Man. No, this term connotes not man as created, but man as corrupted. God did not in creation plant in us a principle of contrariety to Himself, for He fashioned man after His own image and likeness. He made him upright, holy. It was our defection from Him which

plunged us into such immeasurable wretchedness and woe, which polluted and defiled all the springs of our being and corrupted all our faculties. As a result of the fall man is the inveterate enemy of God, not only because of what he does, but because of what he now is in himself. Stephen Charnock said: What kind of enmity this is. First, I understand it of nature, not of actions only. Every action of a natural man is an enemy's action, but not an action of enmity. A toad doth not envenom every spire of grass it crawls upon nor poison every thing it toucheth, but its nature is poisonous. Certainly every man's nature is worse than his actions: as waters are purest at the fountain, and poison most pernicious in the mass, so is enmity in the heart. And as waters partake of the mineral vein they run through, so the actions of a wicked man are tinctured with the enmity they spring from, but the mass and strength of this is lodged in his nature. There is in all our natures such a diabolical contrariety to God, that if God should leave a man to the current of his own heart, it would overflow in all kinds of wickedness.

It is quite true that their deep enmity against God is less openly displayed by some than others, but this is not because they are any better in themselves than those who cast off all pretenses of decency. Their moderation in wickedness is to be attributed to the greater restraints which God places upon them either by the secret workings of His Spirit upon their hopes and fears or by His external providences—such as education, religious instruction, the subduing influence of the pious. But none is born into this world with the slightest spark of love to God in him. "The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent" (Ps. 58:3-4). The poison of a serpent is radically the same in all of its species. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6). These words make it clear that inherent corruption is imparted to us by birth. This is evident from the remainder of the verse: "and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The "spirit" which is begotten differs from the Spirit who is the Begetter, and signifies that new creation of holiness which is effected and inbred in the soul and therefore is called "the seed of God" (1 John 3:9). As the spirit here unquestionably denotes the new nature or principle of holiness, so the flesh in John 3:6 stands for the old nature or principle of sin. This is further established by Galatians 5:17: "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would." Flesh and spirit are there put as two inherent qualities conveyed by two several births, and so are in that respect opposed. That the flesh refers to our very nature as corrupt is seen from the fact that it has works or fruits. The flesh is a principle from which operations issue, as buds from a root. The scope of Christ in John 3 shows that flesh has reference to the corruption of our nature. His evident design in those verses was to show what imperative need there is for fallen man to be regenerated. Now regeneration is nothing else but a working of new spiritual dispositions in the whole man, called there "spirit," without which it is impossible that he should enter the kingdom of God. Christ said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (v. 6), by which statement He made it the direct opposite of the spirit of holiness which is wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit. Had we derived only guilt from Adam we would need only justification; but since we also derived corruption of nature we need regeneration too. There is, then, in every man born into this world a mass of corruption which inheres in and clings to him and which is the principle and spring of all his activities. This may justly be termed his nature, for it is the predominant quality which is in all and which directs all that issues from him. Let us now proceed to the proof of this compound assertion. First, it is a mass of corruption, for that which our Lord called flesh in John 3:6 is called "the old man, which is corrupt" by His apostle in Ephesians 4:22. Observe carefully what is clearly implied by this term, and see again how perfectly one part of Scripture harmonizes with another. Corruption necessarily denotes something which was previously good, and so it is with man. God made him righteous; now he is defiled. Instead of having a holy soul, it is depraved; instead of an immortal body, it has within it even now the seeds of putrefaction. Second, we have said that this corruption cleaves to man's very nature. It is

expressly said to be within him: "Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7:17-18). Man, then, has not only acts of sin which are transient, which come from him and go away, but he has a root and spring of sin dwelling with him, residing in him, not only adjacent to but actually inhabiting him. Not simply our ways and works are corrupt; "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). Nor is this something which we acquire through association with the wicked; rather it is that which we bring with us into the world: "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child" (Prov. 22:15). Third, we have stated that this indwelling corruption is the predominant principle of all the actions of unregenerate man, that from which all proceeds. Surely this is clear from "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife" (Gal. 5:19-21). The flesh is here said to have works or fruits, and this quality of fruit-bearing exists in man's nature. Note that hatred and wrath are not deeds of the body, but dispositions of the soul and affections of the heart; thus the flesh cannot be restricted to our physical structure. This evil principle or corruption is divinely labeled a root: "Lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood" (Deut. 29:18; cf. Heb. 12:13). It is a root which brings forth "gall and wormwood," that is, the bitter fruits of sin; in fact, it is said to "bring forth fruit unto death" (Rom. 7:5). Fourth, we have affirmed that there is a mass of this corruption which thoroughly affects and defiles man's being. This is confirmed by the fact that in Colossians 2:11 it is called a body, which has many members: "In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ." This body of the sins of the flesh is of abounding dimensions, a body which has internal and external manifestations, gross and more secret lusts. Among these are atheism and contempt or hatred of God, which is not fully perceived by man until the Holy Spirit pierces him to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit. That this corruption lies in the very nature of man appears from the psalmist's statement "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (51:5). David was there confessing the spring from which his great act of sin sprang. In essence he said, "I have not only committed the awful act of adultery, but there is sin even in my inward parts, defiling me from the moment I was conceived" (cf. v. 6). Finally, we have declared that this corruption may in a very real sense be termed the nature of man. Once more we appeal to John 3:6 in proof, for there it is predicated in the abstract, which implies more than a simple quality, even that which explains the very definition and nature of man. The Lord Jesus did not say merely, "That which is born of the flesh is fleshly"; He said it "is flesh." In that statement Christ framed a new definition of man, beyond any the philosophers have framed. Philosophers define man as a rational animal; the Son of God announces him to be flesh, that is, sin and corruption contrary to grace and holiness, this being his very nature as a fallen creature in the sight of God. The very fact that this definition of man's nature is, as it were, in the abstract argues that it is a thing inherent in us. But let us enlarge a little on this point. Definitions are taken from things brought out in nature, and none but essential properties are ingredients in definitions. Definitions are taken from the most predominant qualities. Sinful corruption is a more predominant principle in man's nature than is reason itself, for it not only guides reason, but it resides in every part and faculty of man, while reason does not. This corruption is so inbred and predominant and so diffused through the whole man that there is mutual expression between man and it. In John 3:6 the whole of man's nature is designated flesh; in Ephesians 4:22 this corruption is called man: "Put off . . . the old man, which is corrupt." Obviously we cannot put off our essential substance or discard our very selves, only that which is sinful and foul. It is called the old man because it is inherited from Adam, and because it is contrasted with our new nature. **BONDAGE OF CORRUPTION** Man's nature, then, which has become corrupt and termed flesh, is a bundle of foolishness and vileness, and it is this which renders him totally impotent to all that is good. Thus Scripture speaks of

"the bondage of corruption" (Rom. 8:21) and declares men to be "the servants [Greek, 'slaves'] of corruption" (2 Pet. 2:19). Reluctant as any are to acknowledge this humbling truth, the solemn fact that the very nature of man is corrupt and that it defiles everything which issues from him is clearly and abundantly demonstrated. First, the human creature sins from earliest years. The first acts which evidence reason have sin also mingled with them. Take any child and observe him closely, and it will be found that the first dawnings of reason are corrupt. Children express reason selfishly—as in rebellion when thwarted, in readiness to please themselves, in doing harm to others, in excusing themselves by lying, in pride of apparel. John Bunyan said: To speak my mind freely: I do confess it is my opinion that children come polluted with sin into the world, and that oftentimes the sins of their youth—especially while they are very young—are rather by virtue of indwelling sin than by examples that are set before them by others: not but what they learn to sin by example too, but example is not the root but rather the temptation to wickedness.

How can we believe otherwise when our Lord has expressly affirmed, "For from within, out of the heart of .men [and not from association with degenerates], proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these things come from within, and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23). It is true that evil habits may be acquired through contact with evildoers, but they are the occasion and not the radical cause of the habits. This pollution of our very nature, this indwelling corruption, holds men in complete bondage, making them utterly impotent to do that which is good. In further proof of this, let us turn again to Romans 7. In his explanation of why he was unable to perform that obedience which God required, the apostle said, "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (vv. 21-23). Indwelling sin is here called a law. Literally, a law is a moral rule which directs and commands, which is enforced with rewards and penalties, which impels its subjects to do the things ordered and to avoid the things forbidden. Figuratively, law is an inward principle that moves and inclines constantly to action. As the law of gravity draws all objects to their center, so sin is an effectual principle and power inclining to actions according to its own evil nature. When the apostle says, "I see another law in my members" (that is, in addition to the principle of grace and holiness communicated at the new birth), he refers to the presence and being of indwelling sin; when he adds "bringing me into captivity" he signifies its power and efficacy. Indwelling sin is a law even in believers, though not to them. Paul said, "I find, then. . . a law of sin." It was a discovery which he had made as a regenerate man. From painful experience he found there was that in him which hindered his communion with God, which thwarted his deepest longings to live a sinless life. The operations of divine grace preserve in believers a constant and ordinarily prevailing will to do good, notwithstanding the power and efficacy of indwelling sin to the contrary. But the will in unbelievers is completely under the power of sin—their will of sinning is never taken away. Education, religion and convictions of conscience may restrain unbelievers, but they have no spiritual inclinations of will to do that which is pleasing to God. That the very nature of man is corrupt, that it defiles everything which issues from him, is apparent not only by his sinning from earliest youth. Second, it is apparent by his sinning constantly. Not only is his first act sinful; all his subsequent actions are such. "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5)—nor has man improved the slightest since then. Not that everything done by the natural man is in its own nature sinful; but as the acts are those of a sinner, they cannot be anything else than sinful. The act itself may be the performance of duty; yet if there is no respect for the commandment of God, it is sinful. To provide food and raiment is a duty, but if this duty is done from no spiritual motive (out of subjection to God's authority or the desire to please Him) or end (that God may be glorified), it is sinful. "The plowing of

the wicked is sin" (Prov. 21:4); plowing is a duty in itself; nevertheless it is sinful as being the action of a sinner. Third, it is not thus with a few, but with every member of Adam's fallen race. This further demonstrates that all evil proceeds from the very nature of man. "All flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth" (Gen. 6:12). "There is none righteous, no, not one. . . . They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good" (Rom. 3:10-12). All members of the human race sin thus of their own accord. "A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Prov. 29:15). A child does not have to be taught to sin; he has only to be left to himself, and he will soon bring his parents to shame. Things which are not natural have to be taught us and diligently practiced before we learn them. Throw a child into the water, and it is helpless; throw an animal in, and it will at once begin to swim, for its nature teaches it to do so. "Train up a child in the way he should go" (Prov. 22:6). Much diligence and patience are required in those who would thus train the child; but no instructors are needed to inform him of the way in which he should not go. His depraved nature urges him into forbidden paths; indeed, it makes him delight in them.

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