

Ability and Inability

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney argues that the distinctions between natural and moral ability and inability are nonsensical and that the Holy Spirit's agency is employed in inducing obedience to the moral law.

Scripture: Joshua 24:19, John 1:12, John 6:44

Topics: "Role of the Holy Spirit", "Ability to Obey"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the concepts of ability and inability in relation to obeying God's law, arguing that the distinctions made by various philosophers and theologians are nonsensical. He emphasizes that true moral ability exists within every individual, and that the Holy Spirit's role is to persuade rather than to make one able to obey. Finney asserts that God does not require the impossible from humanity, and that the real issue lies in the unwillingness to obey rather than an inability. He calls for a decisive commitment to serve God, echoing Joshua's challenge to the Israelites.

Transcript

'And Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the Lord: for He is a holy God.['] [Joshua 24:19]

In this discussion, I shall

I. POINT OUT THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF ABILITY AND INABILITY TO OBEY THE LAW OF GOD, WHICH HAVE BEEN INSISTED ON BY DIFFERENT CLASSES OF PHILOSOPHERS AND DIVINES.

II. SHOW THAT THIS DISTINCTION IS NONSENSICAL.

III. WHAT IS INTENDED BY THE LANGUAGE OF THE TEXT AND SIMILAR PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE.

IV. WHY THE HOLY SPIRIT IS EMPLOYED IN THE PRODUCTION OF HOLINESS.

I. Distinction between the different kinds of ability and inability to obey the law of God, which have been insisted on by different classes of philosophers and divines.

1. Natural ability, according to them, is to do as you will, irrespective of the question of ability to will in any direction in view of motive. In their definition of natural ability, they keep entirely out of view, the doctrine

which they hold to be true, that the will is invariably and inevitably determined by motives. Some state the doctrine of natural ability, to be the possession of the faculties of a moral being, with the power to use them whenever, and as you are disposed or choose to use them, leaving out of view the how it comes to pass that we are disposed to use them.

2. These statements and definitions are specious. But let it be remembered, that these same philosophers hold also that choice is necessarily determined by motives. They reject the term necessity, and use the term certainty, to avoid the charge of fatalism; but so explain what they mean by certainty, as to show that necessity is really intended. They, or the leaders of their school, hold, that the connection between motive and choice is the same in kind and efficiency, as that between a physical cause and its effect. So that the difference does not consist in the kind of connection, but in the terms connected. Their proposition is, that the will always and invariably, is as the greatest apparent good is--that whatever appears to the mind to be upon the whole most agreeable, invariably determines the choice of the mind in that direction. Indeed, the leader of this school maintains, that choice is nothing else than the very state of mind referred to, that is, that a thing's appearing to be the most agreeable, and choosing that thing are identical. This, then, is the plain sentiment of this class of theologians: that whenever a thing is presented to the mind in such relations as to appear upon the whole the most agreeable, this is choice, or the determination of the will. And this is what they mean by the will's invariably being as the greatest apparent good.

Now it is very plain, that the very nature of the connection between the physical cause and its effect, is that of necessity. And if, according to them, the connection is the same in kind, between motive and choice, then choice must be determined by necessity. You may call it necessity or certainty, or what you will, the true idea and thing intended, is necessity.

3. Moral ability, according to them, is the presence of such motives as to determine the will by this kind of misnamed certainty.

4. The impossibility of executing our volitions or doing as we will, they term, natural inability. Observe, natural ability, according to them, is the power to do as you will, or to execute your volitions. Natural inability is the want of power to do as you will. If, for example, you put forth volitions to accomplish a certain object, and are unable to execute, or bring about the thing at which you aim, this is natural inability.

5. The absence of sufficient motives to determine the will with this kind of misnamed certainty, they call moral inability. It is called a moral inability, not because it is not a real inability, but because it is inability of will. If there are not sufficient motives to cause the proposed object of choice to appear to the mind upon the whole the most agreeable, or to be the greatest apparent good, in this case, there is a moral inability, that is, an inability to choose in that direction. Whereas, if there are sufficient motives to make the impression of the most agreeable on the mind, in this case, choice is produced, and here is a moral ability.

6. Another class of philosophers reject these distinctions, and deny both natural and moral ability, but maintain a gracious ability to conform to the claims of God. Their gracious ability consists in this, that through the atonement of Christ, God, by his Spirit, and gracious influences, has removed inability of every kind, and made it possible for men, through this gracious aid, to obey the law of God.

Without this aid they maintain, that fallen or sinful beings have no kind of ability to obey God. Hence consistency drives them to maintain, that but for the atonement and gracious divine influence, men after the fall, would have been under no obligation to obey God, and that those in hell, from whom the gracious influence is withdrawn, are under no such obligation. It is easy to see, also, that if consistent, they must

deny that Satan has ever sinned since his fall, or can sin, unless the atonement and gracious ability extend to him.

Observe, I do not intend that all, who professedly belong to either of these schools, are consistent enough, to hold the whole of their theory, as I have stated it. But I have stated the doctrine of natural and moral ability and inability, and of gracious ability just as held by the leading minds of these different schools, if I rightly understand them, which I have taken much pains to do.

II. These distinctions are nonsensical.

1. Their natural ability is no ability at all. Observe, their definition of natural ability is, the power to act or do as you will, leaving out of view the question whether you have power to choose in a given case, or given direction, or not. Now, every one knows, that the power to act depends on the power to choose. If a given course of conduct be proposed to me, it is naturally impossible for me to pursue it, unless I can choose to do so. But, according to them, if such motives are not presented to my mind, as to make that course appear the most agreeable, I am unable to choose to pursue it, and I am, therefore, in the highest sense, naturally unable to pursue that course. Now, who does not see, that an ability to act or do as you will, is no ability at all, unless you have ability to choose in that direction. Is not, therefore, their definition of natural ability which denies the power to choose in any direction in view of motives, nonsensical? What is it but nonsense to affirm that I am naturally able to do that which I am naturally unable to will to do? Is it not nonsense to affirm that natural ability to do a thing, consists in the power to do it, if you will, while the power to will in any direction in view of motives, is denied?

2. Their natural inability, so far as morality or virtue is concerned, is no inability at all. In morals, the will is the deed. The virtue or vice of any action does not lie in any outward act, but in the choice or intention of the mind. So that if the choice or intention exists, but we are really unable to execute our intention, we are as virtuous or as vicious as if we had executed it. And this is the doctrine of the Bible; 'If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.' It should always be understood that obedience and disobedience in the eye of God consists in acts of will. If a man wills, or really intends, in accordance with the will of God, although he may be unable to do as he wills, or to accomplish the thing he intends, yet the will is taken for the deed, and he is as virtuous as if he did accomplish it.

3. If men act at all, they cannot but act as they will. Will, choice, or volition, necessitates action. If I will to move my muscles, they move of necessity, if they move at all. If there be a paralysis of the nerves of voluntary motion, volition will fail to produce muscular action. So there may be an opposing force, which shall overpower my volition, and prevent its execution. But if I act at all, I act always and necessarily according to my will, and cannot by any possibility act against it.

4. Their moral ability, is no ability at all. For observe, that moral ability, according to them consists in the presence of such motives, as to produce choice, by necessity, or as they say, certainty, which certainty, as I have said, when explained, is nothing else than sheer necessity. There is no magic in words. To call it certainty, and then so explain the certainty, as to make it sheer and absolute necessity, is only to trifle on a momentous subject. The fact is, that their moral ability is nothing else than choice produced by necessity--motive producing choice in the same way, or by a connection the same in kind, that unites a physical cause with its effect. Now, if men are disposed to call this certainty, and tell us to remember that they mean certainty and not necessity, are we to throw away our common sense, and even our intellectual

perception, of the fact, that this certainty is nothing more nor less than sheer necessity.

5. Their moral inability is an absolute natural inability. Observe, moral inability with them, is the absence of sufficient motives to produce choice, by this kind of misnamed certainty of which I have just been speaking. It is an inability to choose for want of sufficient motives to produce choice, or which is the same thing with them, the sense of the most agreeable. In other words, they are unable to choose for want of sufficient motives, and this is called a moral inability, because it is an inability to choose. Now, why call this a moral inability, when it is self-evident, that it is nothing else than natural inability. It is the highest, and most proper and perfect kind of inability, an inability to will, and of course, and of necessity, an inability to act, and is it not nonsensical, by introducing the word moral, to attempt to distinguish this from a natural inability.

6. The gracious ability of the philosophers of this school, has no grace whatever in it, because,

(1.) It is a first truth of reason that moral obligation implies the possession of every kind of ability which is indispensable to render the required act possible. For example, if God requires me to fly, He must furnish me wings. And this furnishing me with wings to enable me to obey the commandment to fly, is not, in view of the circumstances, a gracious ability. He is in justice bound (if He requires me to fly) to give me wings. And it is absurd and nonsensical to call this a gracious ability. Should He require me to fly without giving me wings, the requirement would be unjust, and it would impose on me no obligation. This is a first truth of reason. But if it be true, that He will be unjust to require me to fly without giving me wings, it follows, of course, that the giving of wings in reference to this commandment, would not be grace, but justice. Nor is the case at all altered if I have plucked my own wings, and thereby rendered myself unable to fly. For this He may punish me, but cannot hold me obliged to fly, until He restores my ability. So if He requires me to raise the dead, He must give me power to do so. And unless He confer the power, the command would not be obligatory. Now, in view of the command to raise the dead it is nonsensical to call the bestowment of power sufficient to obey the command, a gracious ability, for it is not grace, but mere justice. These are first truths of reason. They need no proof, and to call for proof of truths of this class, is absurd and nonsensical.

(2.) If men lost their ability to obey God by sin, and God should still demand service of them, He must, in the first place, in justice restore their ability. He might punish them for destroying their ability, but could not require obedience of them until their ability is restored. It would seem that this class of philosophers admit that God must in justice restore ability before he can require obedience. For they maintain that if the atonement had not been made and divine influence vouchsafed, men would not have been under obligation to obey God. And that those in hell, from whom this divine influence is withdrawn, are under no obligation to repent and love and obey God. Now how nonsensical it is to maintain that without this ability men would be under no obligation to obey God, and still call it a gracious ability. It is what justice in reality demands according to their own view. For God to claim obedience, and yet while justice demands it at his hands, they call it a gracious ability, what is this confusion of terms but nonsense. The very terms gracious ability are an absurdity, for what is grace? It is the bestowment of that which justice cannot claim. But justice does demand that a moral being should possess the requisite ability, whatever that is, to do and be what he is commanded to do and be. And the bestowment of this cannot be grace but justice.

(3.) Where the gospel is preached and the Holy Spirit's influences are enjoyed, God may claim and does claim and ought to claim, corresponding service. But where He claims a higher service, in consequence of increased light, He does not consider the increased light in reference to the enlarged requirement grace,

but justice.

By this I do not mean that the atonement and the influences of the Holy Spirit are not grace, but that they really are so, and that they are grace because men have not lost their natural ability to do their duty by sin; that, therefore, the atonement and divine influence, were not necessary to make men able to do their duty, but to induce in them a willingness to do it.

(4.) There is no inability whatever, under the moral government of God, to obey Him perfectly. Where the mere light of nature is enjoyed men are able to walk according to it, which is all that God requires of them, and for not doing which He condemns them. This Paul argues at length in his epistle to the Romans.

All moral agents then, in all worlds, are able to obey, and consequently are bound to obey God perfectly, and perfect obedience in a heathen would be, a living up, in all respect, to the law of nature as revealed in the works and providence of God. Perfect obedience in a child, would be a living up in all respect, in heart and life, to the best light enjoyed. The same is true of men under the law, and under the gospel, of the angels in heaven, and of all moral beings in all worlds.

III. What is intended by the language of the text and similar passages of Scripture?

1. Words are signs of ideas, and are always to be understood, of course, according to the subject matter about which they are used. For example; if I say I cannot create a world, every body would understand me to mean by cannot, a natural impossibility. If I say I cannot take twenty dollars for my watch, no man in his senses would understand me to use the term cannot in the same sense in which I did before. He would understand me only as affirming that I was unwilling to sell my watch for that price. He would not so much as dream that I had not natural ability or power to consent to sell my watch for twenty dollars. Now it is very remarkable that on other subjects such language is readily understood by the common sense of men, and no where, but on religious subjects do they seem so widely to depart from common sense, in the interpretation of language, as to make cannot, when applied to acts of will, imply an inability of any kind.

2. With respect to the language of the text, the connection in which it stands shows the sense in which Joshua meant to be understood, when he said to the people, 'ye cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God.' Any one who will take the trouble to read, will see that nothing was farther from his intention than to affirm that there was either a natural or a moral inability in them to serve the Lord, for in the same connection he calls on them to enter into a solemn covenant to serve the Lord, to which they consented upon the spot.

3. The whole connection shows that they did not understand him as teaching the doctrine of an inability of any kind in them to render an acceptable service to Jehovah. Joshua merely intended, and they manifestly understood him to affirm, that they could not render an acceptable service to Jehovah unless they became holy. But their ability to become holy is as strongly as possible implied in the whole connection and transaction.

4. Let a similar passage in Genesis 19:22, explain this. 'Haste thee, escape thither: for I cannot do any thing till thou be come thither: therefore the name of the city was called Zoar.' --Here Jehovah speaks of Himself in similar language. He says to Lot, 'Haste thee, for I can do nothing until thou be come thither.' Who can believe that He intended to affirm of Himself an inability of any kind, to destroy Sodom before Lot arrived at Zoar? He manifestly intended merely to say that his mind was made up not to destroy Sodom till Lot was safe, and that therefore, He was unwilling to rain fire and brimstone upon the devoted city until

Zoar had closed its gates upon Lot.

5. See also John 1:12. 'But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believed on his name.' In the margin of your Bible, you will see that the word 'power,' is rendered right or privilege. This passage has, not unfrequently, been quoted as implying an inability in the sinner to become a Christian. But it favors no such idea. It only teaches that those who received Christ, were themselves received to the privileges of adopted sons.

6. See also John 6:44, 45. 'No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.' 'It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me.' The 44th verse is often quoted in proof of the doctrine of natural or moral inability. But what inability is here intended? When the two verses are read together, we learn that no man is able to come to Christ unless he is enlightened or taught the way of salvation by Christ. It is certainly a plain truth that a man needs to be informed of the way of salvation by Christ in order to come to Christ. This text does not begin to teach any inability whatever, in those who have been taught, and understand the way of salvation by Jesus.

Here let me remark that so to explain these passages as to make them teach either a moral or a natural inability is to deny the freedom of the will. But that the will is free we have the testimony of our own consciousness. To come to Christ, to do our duty, in other words to be holy, consists in acts of will. Now to affirm an inability to will in any direction, in view of motives, is to affirm that as true which our consciousness teaches us to be false.

I might quote other passages that have been relied on to support the doctrine of inability, but have said enough to give the candid reader a clue to the right understanding of them all. And for the caviler I am not now writing.

IV. Why the agency of the Holy Spirit is employed in inducing obedience to the moral law.

1. The Bible represents Him as exerting his influence over mind, by or through the presentation of truth to the mind. In other words, as exerting the influence of a divine moral suasion. 1 Pet. 1:22, 23: 'Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: 'Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.' James 1:18: 'Of his own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.' John 17:17-- 'Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth.' In these and similar passages, we learn that the manner and kind of influence which He exerts, is that of persuasion and not of compulsion.

2. The thing which He is employed to do is not to make them able, but to induce in them a willingness, by a persuasive influence, to submit themselves to God.

3. With many, to deny a physical divine influence in regeneration, to deny that the Spirit of God is employed to make men able, and that He only employs his agency in persuading them to be willing, is to deny the divine agency altogether. What do they mean? I am afraid of these men. It seems as if they were determined to hide away themselves under the plea of inability, and to screen others under the same refuge of lies.

REMARKS.

1. To represent God as requiring impossibilities on pain of eternal death, is to hold up his character and government to irresistible abhorrence. Men are so constituted that, by an unalterable law of their reason, they affirm intuitively, irresistibly, and indignantly, that for any government, human or divine, to require natural or moral impossibilities is unjust and tyrannical. And until the very nature of man is altered, this must forever be the case. It has been publicly affirmed not long since, by a Doctor of Divinity in the Presbyterian church, that moral obligation did not imply any kind of ability whatever to do our duty. Now a more shocking and revolting contradiction of reason, common sense, and the Bible, could hardly be stated in words. Such statements are in exact accordance with the spirit and policy of the devil.

2. It has always been the policy of Satan to misrepresent the character and government of God. He prevails by falsehood. He sustains his dominion in this world by gross misrepresentations of the character of God. It has always been of the greatest importance to him and his cause to deceive the Church and induce the leading minds to entertain and publish to the world, views of the character and government of God which are at war with reason and the Bible. He very early succeeded in this, under the Christian dispensation. And who that is acquainted with the opinions and dogmas of the Christian fathers, does not know that they very early began to inculcate the most absurd and revolting dogmas concerning the character and government of God. One of the leading minds among them could say of a certain doctrine, "It is absurd and therefore I believe it." In every age of the Christian Church, Satan has succeeded in influencing a certain class of minds to adopt and shamelessly avow, and zealously to inculcate dogmas as the truth of God, against which the very nature of man cries out with vehement indignation. And this many of them do not pretend to deny, but on the contrary boldly affirm it, and insist that the very nature of man must therefore be changed before he can love God. Instead of representing man as needing to have the voluntary state of his mind changed in respect to God, they represent H[h]im as needing to have his very nature changed, by a creative act of physical Omnipotence. And what sentiment can please the devil better than this?

3. When good but unlearned people have listened to such distorted misrepresentations of God and his government, they have hushed down their rising indignation under the impression that it was a mystery. They have piously chided themselves for having a thought of the injustice and unreasonableness of such dogmas enter their minds. And oftentimes have they diverted their attention and found it indispensable to abstract their minds from the consideration of these dogmas, to prevent the rising remonstrances of their deepest nature, against the injustice of requiring of men natural or moral impossibilities on pain of eternal death.

4. It is remarkable to what extent unconverted but thinking men have become sceptical in view of such representations of the character of God. And ministers that maintain such sentiments are very little aware of the extent to which they preach their unconverted hearers into infidelity. Millions of souls have been ruined by the false representations of the character and government of God, which they have heard from the pulpits not only of notorious heretics, but multitudes of self-styled orthodox.

5. Since the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life has been so much and so pointedly insisted on, multitudes of ministers and others who have heretofore professed to believe and teach the doctrine of ability in every moral agent to do his whole duty, are retiring back to the ranks of those who deny the doctrine of ability. They see and acknowledge that the doctrine of entire obedience to the law of God, or in other words, of entire consecration and sanctification, is only the legitimate application of the doctrine of ability to all the conduct of Christians; that if men are able to obey God perfectly, there is no reason why they should not, nor any ground for the affirmation that they will not. But let not those brethren think to find

a resting place, or an apology for sin under the doctrine of inability, for it is abundantly easy to show that of all the absurd doctrines that ever were broached, not one is more contrary to the Bible and to common sense, and more easily refuted than the doctrine of inability.

6. From what has been said it will be seen that the dependence of sinners and of Christians upon God is of such a nature as to afford no excuse whatever for their sins. If the doctrine of inability were true, and the Spirit of God were indispensable to make them able to do their duty, then their dependence would be an apology for their sins. Or what is still more proper to say, until the divine agency was granted, they could not begin to sin, inasmuch as sin must imply the power to be holy. But if, as has been shown, the sinner is able to obey, and the whole difficulty lies in his unwillingness to do his duty, and if the Spirit is employed only as a persuasive agency to induce a willingness to comply with duty, it is abundantly plain that the sinner's dependence upon the Holy Spirit, affords him not the least shadow of excuse for ever having sinned or for ever indulging in another sin.

7. Until men are willing to confess their sins--that they are able but unwilling to obey God--until they are ingenuous enough to own that their difficulty does not lie in an inability but in a pertinacious obstinacy--until they perceive and allow that the Spirit is not needed to make them able, but only to overcome their voluntary rebellion, they have no reason to expect a divine influence, to lead them to Christ--but have every reason to fear that God will give them up to the agency of Satan, and send them strong delusion, and confirm them in the belief of inability, until they become so utterly blinded as that they cannot 'deliver their souls, or say, have I not a lie in my right hand.'

8. And now sinner, will you be as ingenuous and as courageous as were the Israelites when Joshua uttered the words of the text? If you read the connection you will see that they believed and avowed their belief that they could render to Jehovah an acceptable service. And when Joshua put the question plainly home to them, whether they would, that day, choose and enter upon the service of God, they rose up and signified their determination to serve Jehovah. And from the history of that generation, it is manifest that many of them, to say the least, were sincere and whole-hearted in the avowal of their purpose. Is it not time for you to decide? Will you become holy? Will you serve the Lord? Will you do it now? Answer in your inmost being, upon the spot. If you say no, or if you refuse to answer at all, remember that God may take you at your word; but if you say yes, and mean it, if you let your heart go with your words, your name shall be written in the 'Lamb's book of life.'

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