

Design or Intention Constitutes Character

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes that a person's character is determined by their ultimate intention, and that this intention is the main-spring and cause of all their volitions and actions.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:7, Psalm 28:4, Proverbs 16:2, Jeremiah 17:10, Matthew 5:8, Romans 8:27, 1 Corinthians 4:5, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Galatians 6:7-8, Colossians 3:23-24

Topics: "Moral Character", "Intentions"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that a person's moral character is defined by their ultimate intention rather than their actions or subordinate intentions. He explains the distinction between intention and volition, asserting that true moral character lies in the supreme intention of the mind, which should be to glorify God. Finney warns that intentions can be sinful or holy, and that the ultimate aim of one's actions must be disinterestedly benevolent to be considered holy. He concludes that God will judge individuals based on their intentions, not merely their actions, highlighting the importance of self-examination in understanding one's true character.

Transcript

TEXT--Psalm 28:4: "Give them according to their deeds, and according to the wickedness of their endeavors."

By endeavors in this text, I understand design, or intention.

In discussing this subject, I shall--

I. NOTICE THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN INTENTION AND VOLITION.

II. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN AN ULTIMATE OR SUPREME INTENTION AND A SUBORDINATE INTENTION.

III. SHOW THAT MORAL CHARACTER LIES MAINLY IN THE ULTIMATE OR SUPREME INTENTION OF THE MIND.

IV. SHOW THAT THE MORAL CHARACTER OF THOSE VOLITIONS AND OUTWARD ACTIONS WHICH ARE DIRECTED BY THE INTENTION, IS AS THE ULTIMATE INTENTION IS.

V. SHOW WHEN THE INTENTION IS SINFUL.

VI. WHEN IT IS HOLY.

VII. SHOW THAT A MAN'S CHARACTER, AS DISTINGUISHED FROM THE CHARACTER OF ANY ONE OF HIS ACTS, IS AS HIS SUPREME AND ULTIMATE INTENTION IS.

I. The distinction between intention and volition.

Intention is the mind's design, aim, or end. Not the outward object aimed at, but the inward design of the mind to secure a given object. Volition is the action of the will or those subordinate choices, which are produced and directed by the intention. In other words, intention is a state of the will--a permanent disposition or state of the will, in distinction from single volitions or actions of the will. Volitions, then, are, strictly speaking, the means used by the will, or the efforts which it makes to obtain the object of design or intention.

II. The distinction between an ultimate or supreme intention and a subordinate intention.

An ultimate intention, end, design, or object, is the final end which the mind has in view, and that to which all other ends are subordinate, and to which they sustain only the relation of a means. For example:--A student may work--to get money--to purchase books--to obtain an education--to preach the gospel--to convert sinners--to glorify God. Here are several ends, subordinate to one supreme or ultimate end. The first end which the student has in view is to get money. But this is both an end and a means. His second end is to purchase books. A third end, the end for which he purchases books, is, to obtain an education. But his education is also a means to another end, which is to preach the gospel. This is also a means to another end, the conversion of sinners. And the conversion of sinners is a means to another end, which is, to glorify God.

III. Moral character lies mainly in the ultimate or supreme intention of the mind.

1. It cannot lie in the outward actions. The outward actions of a man, when viewed apart from the intention, have no moral character, any more than the motions of a machine.

2. It cannot lie in volition, irrespective of intention, for the same volition may be holy or sinful, according to the intention. For example: I may will to use the name of God, and the moral character of this intention must depend upon the design I have in using his holy name. I may will to go to a certain place, or to do a certain thing, and this willing or volition may be holy or sinful, as my design to go to that place or to do that thing is good or evil.

3. The reason of every man decides, that character lies in intention. If a man designs to do us evil, and by chance does us good, we do not thank him for it. And if a man designs to do us good, and without any fault of his own, it results in evil, we do not blame him.

4. The text assumes, that the moral character lies in endeavor or intention. Let the case of the student, already referred to, serve as an illustration. The student works to get money. Now it is easy to see that this labor is holy or sinful, according to the use which he intends to make of his money. But when we learn, that he intends to purchase books with his money, we cannot yet decide upon the moral character of what he is doing. Hence, we inquire what books he intends to purchase, and what he intends to do with them. We learn that he wants to obtain an education; but here we are as much at a loss as ever, to know what

the moral character of his conduct is, and must inquire why he obtains an education? We are informed, that it is to preach the gospel. This looks well so far; but as yet we cannot decide upon the moral character of his conduct. He may intend to preach the gospel to promote his own interest, to gratify his ambition, or with some other sinister design. We must, therefore, pursue our inquiries, and know why he designs to preach the gospel. He replies, that it is to convert sinners. But this does not decide his moral character. Why does he wish to convert sinners? Is it that he may be thought and called a useful man, or thus promote his own reputation? We must, then, push our inquiry home, and ask, why he wishes to convert sinners? We are told that it is because he supremely loves God, and dearly loves the souls of men--that he desires to promote God's glory and their happiness, as things good in themselves--that but for this ultimate supreme end, he would not work to get money to buy books, &c.--that he is conscious, that the ultimate intention, that at which he aims, which is the main-spring and cause of all his volitions, and that to which all these other ends are subordinate, is the glory of God and the interests of his kingdom. Here, and not until we arrive here, have we any light in respect to the moral character of his present employment, laboring to get money.

IV. The moral character of those volitions and outward actions which are directed by the intention, is as the ultimate intention is.

1. Because, but for intention they would have no moral character at all.

2. The moral character must be decided by the ultimate intention, as we have just seen in the example of the student. We see him vigorously at work, and know that volition is the cause of all his outward actions. But the moral character of what he is doing cannot be in these volitions themselves, when viewed separately from the intention, in obedience to which they are exercised. We next see the student purchasing his books--and next, poring over his studies--and again, preaching the gospel. In all these instances, we see very busy volition continually at work. But not one of these volitions, when viewed separate from the intention, would have moral character, any more than the volitions of a brute. Nor does the moral character lie in any of the subordinate ends. To get money, to purchase books, to obtain an education, to preach the gospel, have none of them any moral character when viewed apart from the ultimate intention of the mind in doing these things. The reason and common sense of all men affirm this.

V. When the intention is sinful.

1. When the intention is to do wrong, although the thing intended may not be in itself wrong. If it is thought to be wrong, and intended as wrong, it is wrong.

2. When the intention is to do a thing known to be wrong, not because it is wrong, but in spite of its being wrong. Multitudes of human actions come under this denomination; vastly more, no doubt, than under the first. It is believed that men seldom do wrong for the sake of the wrong; but that they generally do wrong, knowing it to be so, not for the sake of the wrong, but for some other reason, and in spite of the wrong.

3. When the intention is, to do or omit a thing, regardless of, and without inquiring into the moral character of that act or omission.

4. When the intention has no respect to the will of God.

5. When the intention is selfish. Whenever the ultimate end is to secure our own good, this is a state of selfishness. This is wrong, because our own is not the highest good, and that at which we ought ultimately

and supremely to aim. God's glory, and the interests of his kingdom, are of infinitely more value than our own individual happiness. Whenever our ultimate intention is to secure our own happiness, our whole character and conduct is sinful, whatever means we may employ. We may attend to all religious duties, with the greatest zeal, give all our goods to feed the poor, our bodies to be burned, if we have not charity, and are not actuated by supreme love to God--if our ultimate intention is not to glorify Him, rather than to make ourselves happy--the foundation of our character is utterly wrong.

VI. When the intention is holy.

When and only when it is the ultimate aim, object, or intention of the mind, to glorify God, and promote the good of the universe. If we design to glorify God as the means of promoting our own happiness, this is selfishness. To glorify and please God must be a thing intended and sought, for its own sake, and on its own account. And when this is the supreme and ultimate end at which we aim, the character is holy. In other words, none but a disinterestedly benevolent intention is holy.

If it be inquired, whether my designing or intending, and laboring to promote the glory of God, will not result in my own happiness, and may not therefore be regarded as the most remote or ultimate end at which I aim, I answer:

1. That supremely to aim at and labor for the promotion of God's glory, will doubtless promote my own happiness.

2. But my own happiness in this case, depends upon the disinterestedness of my intention of laboring to promote the glory of God. If, in laboring to promote the glory of God, my ultimate end is my own happiness, I cannot in this way be happy, any more than I could be happy in praying, if I should pray, not because of communion with God, but to promote my own happiness. I cannot be happy only as I do that which my whole nature approves. My whole moral being decides, that God's glory and interests, are supremely important in themselves, and that I should seek to promote them for their own sake, and on their own account. In no possible way, therefore, can I be happy, only as I act in conformity with this stern and uncompromising dictate of my nature. My happiness, therefore, will result or not result, from my intending and laboring to glorify God, just in proportion to the disinterestedness of my intentions and labor. I repeat it, therefore, that although a man's happiness is a consequence of his intending and laboring to glorify God; yet the intention terminates not at all upon his own happiness as an ultimate end of pursuit, but upon the glory of God and the interests of his kingdom, as something infinitely important in itself.

VII. A man's character, as distinguished from the character of any one of his acts, is as his supreme and ultimate intention is.

1. We have seen, that the character of our acts is as the ultimate end is.

2. A man's character is made up of his ultimate or chief end. Thus, we speak of an avaricious man, an ambitious man, a disinterested man, meaning by such expressions to distinguish the character of the man, from the character of any one of his acts.

REMARKS.

1. The ultimate end which a man has in view in his conduct, may not always be that which occupies his thoughts, and his conduct may be sinful or holy without the ultimate intention being at the time the subject of consciousness, or even thought. The student's thoughts may be, for the time being, wholly upon his

labor or his books; and yet he may be influenced by the ultimate end he has in view, whether it be ambition or disinterested love to God, without being at all conscious at the time, of being influenced by any other than the immediate end before him. But although the immediate object before him is the subject of his thoughts, still his labor or his study is holy or sinful, as his ultimate intention is.

2. There can be but two classes of mankind, in respect to moral character. There is but one right, ultimate end or intention, which is the glory of God and the interests of his kingdom. This ought to be the ultimate intention of every moral being in the universe. Every other ultimate end or intention is entirely wrong. So that there cannot, by any possibility, be more than two classes of moral beings, in respect to moral character, in the universe.

3. From this subject it is easy to see, that unregenerate sinners are, without exception, entirely depraved. We have seen, that a sinner's character is as his ultimate intention is. Every unregenerate sinner has a selfish ultimate or supreme intention, and is, therefore, in a state of total depravity.

4. From this subject we can see what regeneration is--that it consists in the change of the supreme or ultimate intention of the mind.

5. We can see that two persons may act precisely alike, be engaged in the same transactions, and in every respect be outwardly exactly alike, and yet possess moral characters precisely opposite. Nay, they may be both outwardly and inwardly, with the exception of their ultimate intention, exactly alike, and yet possess opposite characters. They may both will to pray, to go to meeting, to perform every religious duty. They may will, do, and be exactly alike in every other respect, if their ultimate object or intention is not the same, their moral characters are, in the sight of God, totally unlike.

6. An action may be morally right, because the intention is so, and yet there may be a sinful ignorance connected with it. A man may mistake in the use of means to glorify God. If he honestly intended to glorify God, the action itself is not sinful, Yet, if he was culpably negligent in the use of the means of information, and has used improper means, through his ignorance, his ignorance is a sin.

7. From this subject we can see what we are to understand by the sin of ignorance. It is that ignorance itself, is a sin, when the means of information are neglected. If I act wholly from right intentions, that act cannot be in itself sinful; yet, if I am mistaken through ignorance, the ignorance itself may be sinful.

Objection. But to this it may be objected, that Paul blamed himself for doing what he verily thought he ought to do-- "many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth."

Ans. It is true, that in this case, Paul was to blame for doing what he verily thought he ought to do, because he was an impenitent sinner at the time, and his ultimate intention was not to glorify God; but he thought he ought to do it in obedience to the superstitious and persecuting notions of the Jews. Had he been a converted man at the time, and had his heart set upon glorifying God, he could not have thought as he did, that he "ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." Therefore, notwithstanding he thought he ought to do it, his conduct was sinful, because the ultimate design or end of doing it was not to glorify God, but to gratify his Jewish prejudices.

8. You see the real distinction between true saints and hypocrites. It does not lie in the fact, that they pursue opposite courses of life, but in that they pursue substantially the same courses of life, with opposite ultimate intentions. The true Christians' ultimate intention being to glorify God; the hypocrite's intention

being his own happiness.

9. It is easy to see the great danger of delusion, because the ultimate intention of the mind is so often and so easily overlooked. Here, for example, are two students, just commencing a course of study. Now how many subordinate ends must they pursue, and how remote, so to speak, is the ultimate end at which they aim. They both labor hard, exercise economy, study hard, and may preach zealously, and be equally useful; and yet their moral characters all along be entirely opposite; their thoughts being taken up so much with the different subordinate ends of pursuit, that they may easily overlook and keep out of view, the ultimate end or main spring of all their actions. But herein lies the moral character of all their conduct. And if they are ignorant or mistaken in respect to this, they may, at any period of their lives, drop into eternity with a false hope, but in a state of such deep delirium as to cry out, "Lord, Lord, open unto us. Have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name cast out devils, and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto you, I never knew you."

10. From this subject it is easy to see, that the sins of real Christians are accidental, in opposition to deliberate and habitual. In other words, that they consist in volitions rather than in deliberate intention. I have said, in a former part of this discourse, that the moral character of those volitions and actions which are caused and directed by an ultimate intention, is as the ultimate intention is. This implies, as I intended it should, that some actions and volitions are not in obedience to an ultimate intention, but in opposition to it, and are caused by the desire of some present gratification. In other words, that they may not be in accordance with, but in opposition to the supreme and ultimate intention of the mind. The moral character of these acts must be determined by the particular design or intention that gave them birth. A man, for example, may set out to go on a foreign mission, with the ultimate intention of glorifying God. Yet, under the force of strong temptation, he may be driven off his course, and either commit a single act, or a series of acts, not in obedience to his ultimate intention, or in accordance with it. Nor yet, are these acts performed with the ultimate intention or in accordance with the ultimate intention of abandoning his missionary enterprise. These acts are not performed in obedience to any ultimate intention, either to glorify God, or to promote his own ultimate interests. But, if I may so speak, they fall out and leave a chasm in his usual course of conduct, through the force of temptation, without any change of his ultimate design. And the reason of them is, that for the time being and under the circumstances, the temptation has more power over his single volitions than his ultimate intention has. This is indeed a deep mystery, but so it is, as a matter of fact, however its philosophy is to be explained. I repeat it, then, that the sins of real Christians, while they are voluntary, are accidental, in opposition to deliberate and habitual.

11. We see why God does not and cannot deal with men in this world according to their real characters. Universalists have vainly asserted that He does; but every man knows, in his own experience, that he is not dealt with precisely according to his character in this life. Now it would create vast confusion, were God to deal with men according to their ultimate intentions, as they appear to Him. It is said that "the ploughing of the wicked is sin." Now upon what ground is it sin? The volitions that regulate the muscles in holding the plough are not sinful. It must be, therefore, that his ploughing is sin, simply because his ultimate intention is selfish. Should God punish men in this life, according to their real character or ultimate intention, it would require the confidence of angels so to believe that He was right as not to be stumbled by his conduct. One man would be punished for ploughing, and another for praying, and another for preaching, and others for multitudes of things, so far as human observation can go, that are good and praise-worthy. While, on the other hand, many actions would be rewarded, which, so far as human observation could go, would be pronounced sinful. It must, therefore, be true, that God does not and

cannot deal with men in this world according to their real character, without perplexing and perhaps ruining the universe.

12. You see from this subject, the necessity of a General Judgment, when God shall disclose the real character of all mankind, to the whole universe, and deal with every man according as his work shall be.

13. Men will be rewarded according to their ultimate intentions, whether they have been able to carry it out or not. "Give them," says the Psalmist, "according to their endeavors." This is the language of inspiration. Here is one man, designed to be a missionary, to save souls, and glorify God. But his health, in the providence of God, has prevented. Be of good cheer, my brother. God will carry on his work without you, and reward you according to your intentions. Here is another man, who has devised and intended to execute liberal things for Zion, but his expectations have been blasted, and he has been unable to succeed according to his endeavors. Well done, good and faithful brother; thou hast done well that it was in thine heart to glorify God. Thou shalt be rewarded according to all that was in thine heart.

14. We can see what permanent sanctification is, and when saints are permanently sanctified. They are permanently sanctified, when they arrive at that state in which they are not drawn aside in heart and in life, to will or to do what is inconsistent with the ultimate intention of glorifying God.

15. How many professors of religion will go down to hell with a lie in their right hand.

16. You can see the secret of the self-righteousness of sinners. They do not judge themselves by their ultimate intention, wherein their moral character lies, but by the subordinate ends at which they aim. If a sinner ploughs, he thinks, surely, there is no harm in this; but on the other hand, takes credit for it, as being in accordance with his duty. He maintains his family, goes to meeting, does thousands of things which professors of religion do. He supposes these things to be commendable and virtuous in themselves, irrespective of the ultimate design, which lies at their foundation, and is the cause of them. In this consists his sad and ruinous mistake.

17. In this same neighborhood lies the ruinous delusion of deceived professors.

18. A man may do wrong, without designing to do wrong. Indeed it is not common for men to aim at the wrong they do, and do things because they are wrong.

19. So also a man may do wrong, without designing to do a thing, notwithstanding it is wrong, but not for that reason.

20. A man sins unless he desires to do right, to act in accordance with his duty.

And now, beloved, when tried by this standard, is MENE TEKEL written upon your Christian character? Will you honestly go down upon your knees before God, and spread your whole heart out before Him? Will you honestly look into the foundation of your conduct, and inquire what is your ultimate and supreme intention? And will you remember . . . that according to your intention, God will deal with you in the solemn Judgment?

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