

Moral Insanity

by Charles Finney

Moral insanity is a state of unmingled wickedness, resulting from the abuse of reason and the persistence of the will in acting against reason and conscience.

Scripture: Genesis 6:5, Proverbs 14:12, Ecclesiastes 9:3, Matthew 6:19, Romans 8:7

Topics: "Rebellion Against God", "Moral Insanity"

Description

Charles Finney delivers a powerful sermon titled 'Moral Insanity,' emphasizing that the unconverted heart is inherently evil and mad, leading individuals to act against their own best interests. He explains that moral insanity is a deliberate choice to reject God's truth and pursue sin, despite knowing better, which results in a state of rebellion against divine authority. Finney illustrates this madness through various examples, showing how sinners prioritize temporal pleasures over eternal truths, ultimately leading to their own destruction. He warns that this moral insanity is a grave condition that can only be remedied through genuine conversion to God, restoring the will to align with reason and conscience. The sermon concludes with a call to recognize the seriousness of moral insanity and the importance of not quenching the Spirit's work in our lives.

Transcript

"The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live." -- Eccl. ix. 3.

THE Bible often ascribes to unconverted men one common heart or disposition. It always makes two classes, and only two, of our race -- saints and sinners; the one class converted from their sin and become God's real friends; the other remaining His unconverted enemies. According to the Bible, therefore, the heart, in all unrenewed men, is the same in its general character. In the days of Noah, God testified "that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every imagination of the thought of his heart was only evil continually." Observe, He speaks of the thought of their heart, as if they had one common heart -- all alike in moral character. So by Paul, God testifies that "the carnal mind is enmity against God," testifying thus, not of one man, or of a few men, but of all men of carnal mind. So in our text, the phraseology is expressive: "the heart of the sons of men is full of evil" -- as if the sons of men had but one heart -- all in common -- and this one heart were "full of evil." You will notice this affirmation is not made of one or two men, nor of some men, merely; but "of the sons of men:" as if of them all.

1. But what is intended by affirming that "madness is in their heart while they live?"

This is not the madness of anger, but of insanity. True, sometimes people are mad with anger; but this is not the sense of our text. The Bible, as well as customary speech, employs this term, "madness" -- to express insanity. This we understand to be its sense here.

Insanity is of two kinds. One of the head; the other of the heart. In the former, the intellect is disordered, latter, the will and voluntary powers. Intellectual insanity destroys moral agency. The man, intellectually insane, is not, for the time, a moral agent; moral responsibility is suspended because he can not know his duty, and can not choose responsibly as to doing or not doing it. True, when a man makes himself temporarily insane, as by drunkenness, the courts are obliged to hold him responsible for his acts committed in that state; but the guilt really attaches to the voluntary act which creates the insanity. A man who gets intoxicated by intelligently drinking what he knows is intoxicating, must be held responsible for his acts during the ensuing intoxication. The reason of this is, that he can foresee the danger, and can easily avoid it.

The general law is that, while the intellect retains its usual power, so long moral obligation remains unimpaired.

Moral insanity, on the other hand, is will-madness. The man retains his intellectual powers unimpaired, but he sets his heart fully to do evil. He refuses to yield to the demands of his conscience. He practically discards the obligations of moral responsibility. He has the powers of free moral agency, but persistently abuses them. He has a reason which affirms obligation, but he refuses obedience to its affirmations.

In this form of insanity, the reason remains unimpaired; but the heart deliberately disobeys.

The insanity spoken of in the text is moral, that of the heart. By the heart here, is meant the will -- the voluntary power. While the man is intellectually sane, he yet acts as if he were intellectually insane.

It is important to point out some of the manifestations of this state of mind. Since the Bible affirms it to be a fact that sinners are mad in heart, we may naturally expect to see some manifestations of it. It is often striking to see how perfectly the Bible daguerreotypes human character; has it done so in reference to this point? Let us see.

Who are the morally insane?

Those who, not being intellectually insane, yet ACT as if they were.

For example, those who are intellectually insane, treat fiction as if it were reality, and reality as if it were fiction. They act as if truth were not truth, and as if falsehood were truth. Every man knows that insane people actually follow the wild dreams of their own fancy, as if they were the most stern reality, and can scarcely be made to feel the force of anything truly real.

So men, in their sins, treat the realities of the spiritual world as if they were not real, but follow the most empty phantoms of this world, as if they were stern realities.

They also act as if self were of supreme importance, and everything else of relatively no importance. Suppose you were to see a man acting this out in common life. He goes round, day after day, assuming that he is the Supreme God, and practically insisting that everybody ought to have a supreme regard to his rights, and comparatively little or no regard for other people's rights. Now, if you were to see a man saying this and acting it out, would you not account him either a blasphemous or insane?

Observe, now, the wonderful fact, that while wicked men talk so sensibly as to show that they know better, yet they act as if all this were true -- as if they supposed their own self-interest to be more important than everything else in the universe, and that God's interests, and rights even, are nothing in comparison. Practically, every sinner does this.

It is an essential element in all sin. Selfish men never regard the rights of anybody else, unless they are in some way linked with their own.

If wicked men really believed their own rights and interests to be supreme in the universe, it would prove them intellectually insane, and we should hasten to shut them up in the nearest mad-house; but when they show that they know better, yet act on this groundless assumption, in the face of their better knowledge, we say, with the Bible, that "madness is in their hearts while they live."

Again, see this madness manifested in his relative estimate of time and of eternity. His whole life declares that, in his view, it is by far more important to secure the good of time than the good of eternity. Yet, if a man should reason thus, should argue to prove it, and should soberly assert it -- you would know him to be insane, and would help him to the mad-house. But, suppose he does not say this -- dares not say it -- knows it is not true; yet constantly acts it out, and lives on the assumption of its truth, what then? Simply this -- he is morally mad. Madness is in his heart.

Now precisely this is the practice of every one of you who is living in sin. You give the preference to time over eternity, You practically say -- O give me the joys of time: why should I trouble myself yet about the trivial matters of eternity?

In the same spirit you assume that the body is more than the soul. But if a man were to affirm this and go round trying to prove it, you would know him to be insane. O, if he were a friend of yours, how your heart would break for his sad misfortune reason lost! But if he knows better, yet practically lives as if it were even so, you only say, he is morally insane -- that is all!

Suppose you see a man destroying his own property, not by accident or mistake, but deliberately; injuring his own health, also, as if he had no care for his own interests; you might bring his case before a judge and sue out a commission of lunacy against him; under which the man's goods should be taken out of his own control, and he be no longer suffered to squander them. Yet, in spiritual things, wicked men will deliberately act against their own dearest interests; having a price put into their hands to get wisdom, they will not use it; having the treasures of heaven placed within their reach, they do not try to secure them; with an infinite wealth of blessedness proffered for the mere acceptance, they will not take it as a gift. Indeed! How plain it is that, if men were to act in temporal things as they do in spiritual, they would be pronounced by everybody insane. Any man would take his oath of it. They would say -- Only see; the man acts against his own interests in everything! Who can deny that he is insane? Certainly sane men never do this!

But, in moral questions, wicked men seem to take the utmost pains to subvert their own interests, and make themselves insolvent forever! O, how they beggar their souls, when they might have the riches of heaven.

Again, they endeavor to realize manifest impossibilities. For example, they try to make themselves happy in their sins and their selfishness. Yet they know they can not do it. Ask them, and they will admit the thing is utterly impossible; and yet, despite of this conviction, they keep up the effort perpetually to try -- as if

they expected by and by to realize a manifest impossibility. Now, in moral things, it may not strike you as specially strange, for it is exceedingly common; but suppose, in matters of the world, you were to see a man doing the same sort of thing, what would you think of him? For example, you see him working hard to build a very long ladder, and you ask him what for. He says, "I am going to scale the moon." You see him expending his labor and his money, with the toil of a life, to get up a mammoth ladder with which to scale the moon! Would you not say -- He is certainly insane? For unless he were really insane, he would know it to be an utter impossibility. But, in spiritual things, men are all the time trying to realize a result at least equally impossible -- that of being happy in sin -- happy with a mutiny among their own constitutional powers, the heart at war against reason and conscience. The pursuit of happiness in sin is as if a man were seeking to bless himself by mangling his own flesh, digging out his own eyes, knocking in his teeth. Yet men as really know that they can not obtain happiness in sin and selfishness, as they know they can not ensure health and comfort by mutilating their own flesh and tearing their own nerves in sunder. Doing thus madly what they know will always defeat and never ensure real happiness, they show themselves to be morally insane.

Another manifestation of intellectual insanity is loss of confidence in one's best friends. Often this is one of the first and most painful evidences of insanity -- the poor man will have it that his dearest friends are set to ruin him. By no amount of evidence can he be persuaded to think they are his real friends.

Just so sinners in their madness treat God. While they inwardly know He is their real friend, yet they practically treat Him as their worst enemy. By no motives can they be persuaded to confide in Him as their friend. In fact, they treat Him as if He were the greatest liar in the universe. Wonderful to tell, they practically reverse the regard due respectively to God and to Satan -- treating Satan as if he were God, and God as if He were Satan. Satan they believe and obey; God they disown, dishonor, and disobey. How strangely would they reverse the order of things! They would fain enthrone Satan over the universe, giving him the highest seat in heaven; the Almighty and holy God they would send to hell. They do not hesitate to surrender to Satan the place of power over their own hearts which is due to God only.

I have already noticed the fact that insane people treat their best friends as if they were their worst enemies, and that this is often the first proof of insanity. If a husband, he will have it that his dear wife is trying to poison him. I have a case in my recollection -- the first case of real insanity I ever saw, and, for that reason perhaps, it made a strong impression on my mind. I was riding on horseback, and, coming near a house, I noticed a chamber window up and heard a most unearthly cry. As soon as I came near enough to catch the words, I heard a most wild, imploring voice, "Stranger, stranger, come here -- here is the great whore of Babylon; they are trying to kill me, they will kill me." I dismounted; came up to the house, and there I found a man shut up in a cage, and complaining most bitterly of his wife. As I turned towards her I saw she looked sad, as if a load of grief lay heavy on her heart. A tear trembled in her eye. Alas, her dear husband was a maniac! Then I first learned how the insane are wont to regard their best friends.

Now, sinners know better of God and of their other real friends; and yet they very commonly treat them in precisely this way. Just as if they were to go into the places of public resort, and lift up their voices to all bystanders -- Hello, there, all ye -- be it known to you, "the Great God is an almighty tyrant! He is not fit to be trusted or loved!"

Now, everybody knows they treat God thus practically. They regard the service of God -- religion -- as if it were inconsistent with their real and highest happiness. I have often met with sinners who seemed to think

that every attempt to make them Christians is a scheme to take them in and sell them into slavery. They by no means estimate religion as if it came forth from a God of love. Practically, they treat religion as if embraced it would be their ruin. Yet, in all this, they act utterly against their own convictions. They know better. If they did not, their guilt would be exceedingly small compared with what it is.

Another remarkable manifestation of insanity is, to be greatly excited about trifles, and apathetic about the most important matters in the universe. Suppose you see a man excited about straws and pebbles -- taking unwearied pains to gather them into heaps, and store them away as treasures; yet, when a fire breaks out around his dwelling and the village is in flames, he takes no notice of it, and feels no interest; or people may die on every side with the plague, but he heeds it not; would you not say, he must be insane? But this is precisely true of sinners. They are almost infinitely excited about worldly good -- straws and pebbles, compared with God's proffered treasures; but O, how apathetic about the most momentous events in the universe! The vast concerns of their souls scarcely stir up one earnest thought. If they did not know better, you would say -- Certainly, their reason is dethroned; but since they do know better, you can not say less than that they are morally insane, "madness is in their heart while they live."

The conduct of impenitent men is the perfection of irrationality. When you see it as it is, you will get a more just and vivid idea of irrationality than you can get from any other source. You see this in the ends to which they devote themselves, and in the means which they employ to secure them. All is utterly unreasonable. An end madly chosen -- sought by means madly devised; this is the life-history of the masses who reject God. If this were the result of wrong intellectual judgments, we should say at once that the race have gone mad.

Bedlam itself affords no higher evidence of intellectual insanity than every sinner does of moral. You may go to Columbus, and visit every room occupied by the inmates of the Lunatic Asylum; you can not find one insane person who gives higher evidence of intellectual insanity than every sinner does of moral. If bedlam itself furnishes evidence that its bedlamites are crazy, intellectually; so does every sinner that he is mad, morally.

Sinners act as if they were afraid they should be saved. Often they seem to be trying to make their salvation as difficult as possible. For example, they all know what Christ has said about the danger of riches and the difficulty of saving rich men. They have read from His lips, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God." "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." This they know, and yet how many of them are in mad haste to be rich! For this end, some are ready to sacrifice their conscience -- some their health -- all seem ready, deliberately, to sacrifice their souls! How could they more certainly ensure their own damnation!

Thus they regard damnation as if it were salvation, and salvation as if it were damnation. They rush upon damnation as if it were heaven, and flee salvation as if it were hell.

Is this exaggeration? No; this is only the simple truth. Sinners press down the way to hell as if it were the chief good of their existence, and shun the way to heaven as if it were the consummation of evil. Sinner, this is your own moral state. The picture gives only the naked facts of the case, without exaggeration.

3. This moral insanity is a state of unmingled wickedness. The special feature of it which makes it a guilty state, is that it is altogether voluntary. It results not from the loss of reason, but from the abuse of reason. The will persists in acting against reason and conscience. Despite of the affirmations of reason, and reckless of the admonitions of conscience, the sinner presses on in his career of rebellion against God

and goodness. In such voluntary wickedness, must there not be intrinsic guilt?

Besides, this action is oftentimes deliberate. The man sins in his cool, deliberate moments, as well as in his excited moments. If he sins most overtly and boldly in his excited moments he does not repent and change his position towards God in his deliberate moments, but virtually endorses then the hasty purposes of his more excited hours. This heightens his guilt.

Again, his purposes of sin are obstinate and unyielding. In ten thousand ways, God is bringing influences to bear on his mind to change his purposes; but usually in vain. This career of sin is in violation of all his obligations. Who does not know this? The sinner never acts from right motives -- never yields to the sway of a sense of obligation -- never practically recognizes his obligation to love his neighbor as himself, or to honor the Lord his God.

It is a total rejection of both God's law and Gospel. The law he will not obey; the Gospel of pardon he will not accept. He seems determined to brave the Omnipotence of Jehovah, and dare His vengeance. Is he not mad upon his idols? Is it saying too much when the Bible affirms, "Madness is in their heart while they live?"

REMARKS.

1. Sinners strangely accuse saints of being mad and crazy. Just as soon as Christian people begin to act as if the truth they believe is a reality, then wicked men cry out, "See, they are getting crazy." Yet those very sinners admit the Bible to be true, and admit those things which Christians believe as true to be really so; and, further still, they admit that those Christians are doing only what they ought to do, and only as themselves ought to act; still, they charge them with insanity. It is curious that even those sinners themselves know these Christians to be the only rational men on the earth. I can well recollect that I saw this plainly before my conversion. I knew then that Christians were the only people in all the world who had any valid claim to be deemed sane.

2. If intellectual insanity be a shocking fact, how much more so is moral? I have referred to my first impressions at the sight of one who was intellectually insane, but a case of moral insanity ought to be deemed far more afflictive and astounding. Suppose the case of a Webster. His brain becomes softened; he is An idiot! There is not a man in all the land but would feel solemn. What! Daniel Webster -- that great man, an idiot! How have the mighty fallen! What a horrible sight!

But how much more horrible to see him become a moral idiot -- to see a selfish heart run riot with the clear decisions of his gigantic intellect -- to see his moral principles fading away before the demands of selfish ambition -- to see such a man become a drunkard, a debauchee, a loafer; if this were to occur in a Daniel Webster, how inexpressively shocking! Intellectual idiocy is not to be named in the comparison!

3. Although some sinners may be externally fair, and may seem to be amiable in temper and character, yet every real sinner is actually insane. In view of all these solemnities of eternity, he insists on being controlled only by the things of time. With the powers of an angel, he aims not above the low pursuits of a selfish heart. How must angels look on such a case! Eternity so vast, and its issues so dreadful, yet this sinner drives furiously to hell as if he were on the high-road to heaven! And all this only because he is infatuated with the pleasures of sin for a season. At first view, he seems to have really made the mistake of hell for heaven; but, on a closer examination, you see it is no real mistake of the intellect; he knows very well the difference between hell and heaven; but he is practically deluding himself under the impulses of

his mad heart! The mournful fact is, he loves sin, and after that he will go! Alas, alas! so insane, he rushes greedily on his own damnation, just as if he were in pursuit of heaven!

We shudder at the thought that any of our friends are becoming idiotic or lunatic; but this is not half so bad as to have one of them become wicked. Better have a whole family become idiotic than one of them become a hardened sinner. Indeed, the former, compared with the latter, is as nothing. For the idiot shall not always be so. When this mortal is laid away in the grave, the soul may look out again in the free air of liberty, as if it had never been immured in a dark prison; and the body, raised again, may bloom in eternal vigor and beauty; but, alas, moral insanity only waxes worse and worse forever! The root of this being not in a diseased brain, but in a diseased heart and soul, death can not cure it; the resurrection will only raise him to shame and everlasting contempt; and the eternal world will only give scope to his madness to rage on with augmented vigor and wider sweep forever.

Some persons are more afraid of being called insane than of being called wicked. Surely they show the fatal delusion that is in their hearts.

Intellectual insanity is only pitiable, not disgraceful; but moral insanity is unspeakably disgraceful. None need wonder that God should say, "Some shall arise to shame and everlasting contempt."

Conversion to God is becoming morally sane. It consists in restoring the will and the affections to the just control of the intelligence, the reason, and the conscience, so as to put the man once more in harmony with himself -- all his faculties adjusted to their true positions and proper functions.

Sometimes persons who have become converted, but not well established, backslide into moral insanity. Just as persons sometimes relapse into intellectual insanity, after being apparently quite restored. This is a sad case, and brings sorrow upon the hearts of friends. Yet, in no case can it be so sad as a case of backsliding into moral insanity.

An intellectual bedlam is a mournful place. How can the heart of any human sensibility contemplate such a scene without intense grief? Mark, as you pass through those halls, the traces of intellectual ruin; there is a noble-looking woman, perfectly insane; there is a man of splendid mien and bearing -- all in ruins! How awful! Then, if this be so, what a place is hell! These, intellectual bedlams are awful; how much more the moral bedlam!

Suppose we go to Columbus and visit its Lunatic Asylum; go round to all its wards and study the case of each inmate; then we will go to Indiana; then to New York, and so through all the Asylums of each several State. Then we will visit London and its Asylum, where we may find as many insane as in all our Union. Would not this be a mournful scene? Would not you cry out long before we had finished -- Enough! Enough! How can I bear these sights of mad men! How can I endure to behold such desolation!

Suppose, then, we go next to the great moral bedlam of the universe -- the hell of lost souls; for if men will make themselves mad, God must shut them up in one vast bedlam cell. Why should not He? The weal of His empire demands that all the moral insanity of His kingdom should be withdrawn from the society of the holy, and shut up alone and apart. There are those whose intellects are right, but whose hearts are all wrong. Ah, what a place must that be in which to spend one's eternity! The great mad-house of the universe!

Sometimes sinners here, aware of their own insanity, get glimpses of this fearful state. I recollect that, at one time, I got this idea that Christians are the only persons who can claim to be rational, and then I asked myself -- Why should I not so? Would it hurt me to obey God? Would it ruin my peace, or damage my prospects for either this life or the next? Why do I go on so?

I said to myself -- I can give no account of it, only that I am mad. All that I can say is that my heart is set on iniquity, and will not turn.

Alas, poor maniac! Not unfortunate, but wicked! How many of you know that this is your real case? O, young man, did your father think you were sane when he sent you here? Ah, you were so intellectually, perhaps, but not morally. As to your moral nature and functions, all was utterly deranged. My dear young friend, does your own moral course commend itself to your conscience and your reason? If not, what are you but a moral maniac? Young man, young woman, must you in truth write yourselves down moral maniacs?

Finally, the subject shows the importance of not quenching the Spirit. This is God's agency for the cure of moral maniacs. O, if you put out His light from your souls, there remains to you only the blackness of darkness forever! Said a young man in Lane Seminary, just dying in his sins -- Why did you not tell me there is such a thing as eternal damnation? Weld, why did not you tell me? I did. Oh, I am going there -- how can I die so? It's growing dark; bring in a light! And so he passed away from this world of light and hope!

O sinner, take care that you put not out the light which God has cast into your dark heart, lest, when you pass away it shall grow dark to your soul at midday -- the opening into the blackness of darkness forever.

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