

# Prof. Finney's Letters.--No. 34.

by Charles Finney

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*The sermon discusses the concept of natural ability and its relationship to moral ability and the law of God, arguing that moral character lies solely in acts of will and is determined by the ultimate intention of the mind.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 4:7, Matthew 22:37-39, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Galatians 5:13-14, Ephesians 5:17, Philippians 2:13, Colossians 3:23-24, James 1:5, 2 Peter 1:5-7

**Topics:** "Moral Character", "Natural Ability"

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## Description

Charles Finney addresses the concept of natural ability and moral character, arguing against the false distinction between natural and moral ability. He emphasizes that moral inability stems from a lack of sufficient light to recognize the greatest apparent good, which is essential for moral obligation. Finney asserts that true holiness consists in willing as the greatest apparent good is, and that moral character is determined by the ultimate intention of one's will. He urges ministers and Christians to align their definitions of entire sanctification with the doctrine of natural ability to avoid confusion and error. The sermon calls for careful consideration of moral character and the nature of sin in relation to God's law.

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## Transcript

Dear Brother:

Before I pass to the second point to be discussed, I wish to call the attention of the brethren to the subject of my last letter; especially as circumstances, over which I had no control, prevented the present letter from having a place in the last number of your paper. I might enlarge very much on the subject of natural ability; but perhaps have said enough for the class of readers to whom I principally address these letters. I am well aware, that with certain minds it may be eventually necessary, to enter into a still more fundamental discussion of the question of natural ability, in order to remove the false impressions made on many minds by the imaginary distinction between natural and moral ability. I say imaginary distinction; for I do not hesitate to say, that the distinction has no foundation in sound philosophy.

The moral ability and inability, of which so much has been said by some divines, being, after all, when closely examined, nothing more nor less than natural ability and inability, properly so called. For this distinction, when stated in simple language, is just this--natural ability, according to them, consists in the power to do as you will; and a man is said to be naturally able to do that which he can do if he will. Moral inability, according to them, consists in a real inability to will, on account of the absence of sufficient light or motive to induce choice. The whole theory is based upon the assumption, that the will (or choice, of

course and of necessity,) is as the greatest apparent good is. Men are said, then, to be morally unable to will, in the absence of those considerations that really cause the given object to appear to be the greatest good. This moral inability, then, is simply this--an individual is unable to will, because he has not sufficient light to produce the conviction, that it is, upon the whole, best to will in the proposed manner. Now good is the very object of benevolence. The thing required by the law of God is good-willing, or willing good. And the law requires, that every good shall be willed, according to its relative value, as perceived by the mind. This is the very essence, substance, and spirit of the law of God--to regard, will, intend to promote every interest, according to its relative value, so far as we are able to understand its relative value, is the very thing, and the only thing required by the spirit of the law of God.

Now Pres. EDWARDS' theory is, that "the will always is as the greatest apparent good is." If this is so, I affirm that every moral being is perfect, and only perfect, and that continually. Indeed, if his theory is true, that the will is of course and of necessity as the greatest apparent good is, there never was, never will be, and never can be such a thing as sin in the universe: for, as a matter of fact, that state of the will that chooses or wills every interest, according to its perceived relative value, for its own sake, is holiness, and nothing else is holiness. And President Edwards himself, when treating upon the nature of virtue, maintains this sentiment, in all its length and breadth.

The great position which Pres. Edwards labors to establish, and which others have fondly cherished, and strenuously defended, is, that "the will is as the greatest apparent good is." Now he does not mean, that the will is as the greatest apparent good to self is; for he is laboring to establish the philosophy of choice, whether in good or evil beings--whether in good-willing or evil-willing. He is laboring to show what it is that always determines the will, or produces choice--whether the choice be holy or sinful. He regards the will as determined in all instances by the highest motive, and considers that the highest motive, which appears to the mind to be the greatest good. He brings forth his giant strength, to show the absurdity of supposing, that the will is not, in all cases, as the greatest apparent good is. By apparent good is intended, that which appears, is apprehended, or perceived by the mind to be the greatest. By apparent good, then, is and must be intended, that which is perceived and considered by the intelligence as the greatest good.

Now with respect to this position of Pres. Edwards, that "the will is as the greatest apparent good is," I beg leave to say:

1. It is exactly what the law of God enjoins on every moral being; and all that the law of God can justly enjoin. The law legislates only over the voluntary power. It requires only right willing. Hence, love, or good-willing, is the fulfilling of the law. Good-willing is the willing of every interest according to its perceived relative value. In other words, every good is to be willed, for its own sake--to be regarded and treated according to its relative value, as perceived by the mind. I say, as perceived, for knowledge or light is plainly a condition of moral obligation, and indispensable to natural ability. If this is not so, an unborn infant may as well be required to obey the law of God, as one who has arrived at years of understanding. It is, then, the duty and the whole duty of every moral agent, to will that which is the greatest apparent good, and if it be the true doctrine, that the will universally is as the greatest apparent good is, there is not, never was, and never can be a sinner in the universe.

2. No sinner's will is, or while he is a sinner, ever will be or can be as the greatest apparent good is. But his will, choice, universally, is the direct opposite of the greatest apparent good. The reason of every sinner in the universe affirms, that the good of God, and of all beings in the universe, is a greater good than his own. And sin universally consists in preferring a less to a greater apparent or perceived good.

This is the true definition of sin. Sin is the willing of the less of two apparent goods. A sinner's own happiness is a good. But he knows, and cannot but know, that it is the less and not the greater good. Now the giving of his own happiness the preference, over other and higher goods, is the very essence of sin. God's law requires him to will every interest according to its perceived or apparent value, but between two apparent goods he chooses the least. So that the position of Pres. Edwards, in respect to sin, is universally false; and with respect to holiness, it is universally true. That is--it is true, that holiness consists in the will's being as the greatest apparent good is. I do not mean to admit, that the will chooses the greatest apparent good, of necessity; but only that holiness itself must necessarily consist in willing as the greatest apparent good is.

Now what is moral inability, according to this philosophy? It lies in the want of sufficient light to produce the conviction, that the thing required to be chosen is the greatest good. This is called a moral inability. But why a moral inability? This inability can have no moral character. It is to all intents and purposes, as really a natural inability, while it exists, as the want of a perceiving faculty would be. I come back, then, because I am forced back by sound philosophy and common sense, to that view of natural ability, that makes it consist of the following elements:

1. The powers of moral agency.
2. Ability to use or refuse to use them in the required manner.
3. Sufficient light to produce the conviction or affirmation of oughtness, in relation to any point of duty.

Were this the place, and could it be done in a mere newspaper, I should like to enter somewhat into detail, in refutation of the absurd distinction between moral and natural ability and inability, as sometimes contended for. But most of your readers will, I am persuaded, consent to the definition of natural ability which I have given, and do actually consider a moral inability that consists in the absence of sufficient light to produce the conviction of oughtness to be, after all, a real natural inability. My reason affirms, that I ought to treat every interest according to its relative value. If, therefore, I have not sufficient light to affirm that a certain interest ought to be chosen, or willed, as a greater good than some other interest, I am not only not bound to choose that interest, which, with my present light, I am unable to regard as the greater good, but with the light I now have, I have no right, and it would be sin in me to will it. And now what I wish to say to the brethren, is this--I speak now to those who admit the doctrine of natural ability as generally maintained by New School Divines--whenever you make out a definition of entire sanctification, will you see to it, that your definition does not include or imply a denial of the doctrine of natural ability, in any of its essential elements, as these elements have just above been pointed out, in Nos. 1, 2, and 3?

Again, will you, my ministerial brethren, when you preach upon the subject, BE CAREFUL NOT SO TO DEFINE ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION, OR USE ANY SUCH ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION TO THE DOCTRINE AS TO DENY, EXPRESSLY OR IMPLIEDLY, THE DOCTRINE OF NATURAL ABILITY? WILL YOU NOT TEST YOUR DEFINITION AND YOUR ARGUMENTS BY BRINGING THEM INTO THE LIGHT OF THE DEFINITION OF NATURAL ABILITY IN ALL ITS ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS?

Again, WHEN YOU READ ANY DEFINITION OF ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION, OR ANY ARGUMENTS THAT ARE ARRAYED AGAINST IT, WILL YOU NOT BRING THEM INTO THE LIGHT OF THE TRUE DOCTRINE OF NATURAL ABILITY, AND KNOW ASSUREDLY, THAT IF THEY EXPRESSLY OR IMPLIEDLY CONTRADICT THIS, THEY ARE FUNDAMENTALLY FALSE AND ERRONEOUS? THE LAW OF GOD HAS FOR EVER SETTLED THE MORAL OBLIGATION OF MEN UPON THE

FOUNDATION OF NATURAL ABILITY. AND WHATEVER IS INCONSISTENT WITH THIS DOCTRINE IS FALSE.

And to my Christian brethren in general, I wish to say, if you hear ministers preach upon the doctrine of entire sanctification, or if you read in periodicals, or elsewhere, essays upon the subject, WILL YOU REMEMBER TO COMPARE THEIR DEFINITIONS OF ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION, AND THE ARGUMENTS THEY USE IN OPPOSITION TO IT, WITH THE DOCTRINE OF NATURAL ABILITY, AS STATED IN THIS AND MY FORMER LETTER?

I am the more particular, to call the attention of my readers to this point, and request the editor to emphasize these paragraphs, from the fact, that nearly all that I have seen, either in the way of definition or argument, in opposition to the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life, has assumed or implied a denial of the doctrine of natural ability. If ministers and Christians would be guarded and consistent upon this point, in their writings and reasonings upon this subject, they would not so perplex themselves and others, "by multiplying words without knowledge." It were very easy to show, that some of the principal writers upon this subject, and whose writings have had the most extensive influence against the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life, have been guilty of gross blunders and entire inconsistency, both in their definitions of entire sanctification and in the arguments with which they have endeavored to overthrow the doctrine. Both in their definitions and arguments, nothing has been more common, than for them to blunder into a flat denial of the doctrine of natural ability, while they themselves are known to be strenuous maintainers of this doctrine. I do not mean that they have denied the doctrine in words, for this would have shocked them, But I do mean, that their definitions, in many cases, and their arguments have assumed the opposite of the doctrine of natural ability as true. I need not name these writers. All who have read, or will take the trouble to read what has been said within the last two or three years, will readily recollect or perceive the truth of this statement.

I come now to the second point to be discussed, namely:

II. Wherein moral character consists.

By moral character, I mean praise or blame-worthiness. Moral character does not consist:

1. In the nature or substance of soul or body; for no man can be praise or blame-worthy, for the substance of his nature, either of soul or body.
2. Nor does moral character consist in those acts or states of mind that are properly involuntary. Praise or blame-worthiness cannot be affirmed of that over which a moral agent has not control--which he cannot do or prevent. This follows of course, from the doctrine of natural ability, as maintained in this and my last number.
3. Moral character does not consist or belong to unintelligent acts. An idiot, or maniac, or a man in his sleep, or acting under perfect ignorance of moral obligation, can neither be praise nor blame-worthy in such circumstances. This also is affirmed by our natural sense of justice, and is a part of the doctrine of natural ability.
4. Of course moral character does not consist in emotions, or mere feelings; because these are involuntary states of mind, and cannot be controlled by the will. No man can directly force himself into a given state of emotion or feeling. Nor can he, under circumstances calculated to excite emotions, prevent

them by willing their prevention. Mere emotions, or feelings, then, lie beyond the boundary of natural ability, and of course moral character cannot consist in them.

5. That moral character cannot consist in these is evident from the fact, that they are not required by the law of God. The law of God legislates over the voluntary power of the mind, or rather, over the mind in the exercise of its voluntary power, the will. It requires a good-willing, or benevolence. And this benevolence, or good-willing is the fulfilling of the law. This is evident:

(1.) From the nature of the case, moral character must lie solely in acts of will. All virtue is summed up in one word, benevolence, good-willing. God is said to be love, or benevolence, and all his virtue is only some modification of good-willing.

(2.) Moral freedom lies solely in the power of willing. Moral character, therefore, must attach solely to acts of will. Actions of the body, and many actions of the mind, are connected with the will by a natural necessity. The moral character does not attach to the outward act, or motion of the arm or limb, but to the act of willing, which produces, by a natural necessity, this motion. Just so it is with those thoughts, or emotions and feelings, that are connected with the actions of the will by a natural necessity.

(3.) The Bible recognizes acts of will, as constituting obedience or disobedience. "If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what a man hath, and not according to what he hath not." I might quote many passages in confirmation of this truth; but as they will readily occur, I pass to say--

(4.) That moral character does not attach to every act of will. For, as I have said, there may be acts of will without light or knowledge. And again, volition may be in a sense necessitated by choice or intention. If I choose or intend to go to the city of New-York, as soon as I possibly can, this intention will in a sense necessitate the volitions that move the muscles, and carry me forward. I do not suppose, that these volitions are strictly necessitated, because the agent can at any time change his intention, and refuse the volition. But while the intention exists, the consequent volitions, emotions, and actions must exist. This leads me to say--

(5.) That moral character lies solely in the ultimate choice, or intention of the mind. A man's character is as his supreme and ultimate intention is. An ultimate choice or intention is, the choice of a thing, or an intention to do it, for its own sake, and not as a means to some other more remote and higher end. For example--a man labors to get money, to purchase tools, to pursue a calling, to glorify God. Now the great reason for his laboring, that is, his ultimate intention is to glorify God. His proximate intention is to obtain money. His next intention is to purchase tools. A third object is to pursue a calling. But all these are only means to promote one ultimate end, the glory of God. Now his conduct is, in every instance holy or sinful, according as his ultimate end or intention is selfish or supremely and disinterestedly benevolent. Let it be borne in mind, than, that in all instances, the moral character of any act, or state of mind, is as the ultimate intention of that act or state of mind is. If the intention is wholly right, there may be mistake, and a violation of the letter of the law; but there cannot be sin, or a violation of the spirit of the law; for, right intention is nothing else than the very thing which the law of God requires--namely, supreme, disinterested benevolence: or, in other words, choosing, willing, or intending the highest glory of God, and the greatest good of universal being. When the ultimate intention is wrong, there cannot be holiness. There may be obedience to the letter, but cannot be obedience to the spirit of the law; for this ultimate, or selfish intention, willing, or choosing, is the very thing which the law of God forbids.

Now, beloved, I beg of you, let what I have said upon this subject, be thoroughly pondered, and prayed over, until my next.

Brethren, will you think?

Your Brother in the love and fellowship of the blessed Gospel,

C.G. FINNEY

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