

Prof. Finney's Letters.--No. 35.

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney argues that right character consists in supreme, disinterested benevolent intention, which is a sincere and honest intention to do the utmost to promote the universal good of being.

Scripture: Matthew 22:37

Topics: "Holiness", "Moral Character"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the concept of moral and natural ability in relation to sanctification, emphasizing that true holiness is rooted in the supreme intention to promote God's glory and the good of all. He critiques the inconsistencies in the definitions of entire sanctification, arguing that moral character is defined by one's ultimate intentions rather than mere actions. Finney asserts that right character is synonymous with love and benevolence, while wrong character stems from selfishness and choices contrary to God's law. He concludes that true obedience arises from a heart aligned with God's will, rather than mere compliance with the law's letter.

Transcript

Dear Brother:

On recurring to Pres. EDWARDS on the WILL, since my last, I perceive that I misapprehended the meaning of his proposition, that the will or choice universally is as the greatest apparent good is. He so explains the sense in which he uses the term good, as to mean by the proposition, only, that the will is as the most agreeable is. This sets aside the inconsistency mentioned in my last letter, between his treatise on the will and that on the nature of virtue. I hasten to make the correction, as my misrepresentation of his meaning was wholly unintentional.

However, neither this correction, nor any thing else, that I can discover, at all sets aside the absurdity of the distinction which he labors to establish, between natural and moral ability and inability. This natural ability consists in the established connection between volition and its sequences, so that, according to him, a man is naturally able to do that which he will, without at all touching his ability to will otherwise than he does. But this is no natural ability to obey God. Choice, or good-willing, is the very thing required by God. Therefore, a natural ability to be holy must consist in an ability to originate and put forth the required acts of will, or choice. He makes willing and the most agreeable identical. A man, therefore, is unable to will, except in accordance with that which, under the circumstances, appears most agreeable to him. Moral ability, according to Pres. Edwards, consists in the presence of such motives as to make the

required course of conduct appear the most agreeable. The absence of these motives is what he means by a moral inability. But who does not see that this is a natural inability, or that there is no such thing as a natural inability? If I am not entirely mistaken, modern New School divines mean by moral inability a very different thing from this. They intend by it only an unwillingness.

Before I introduce the next topic of discussion, I wish to add--

1. The brethren to whom I alluded in my last letter, admit that all men possess natural ability to do their whole duty.
2. That entire sanctification in this life is the duty of all men, and that this obligation is conditioned upon their natural ability to be so sanctified.
3. They admit and maintain that a state of entire sanctification in this life is attainable, on the ground of natural ability.
4. Now that which has seemed strange to me is, that, with these admissions on their lips, they should approach the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life, and begin with a definition of what constitutes entire sanctification, that includes sundry things which men are naturally unable to do--that at the same breath they should admit that men are naturally able to be entirely sanctified in this life, and that this natural ability is the condition of their obligation, and still include that in their definition of entire sanctification which renders the supposition of its being attainable in this life an absurdity. For example, one maintains that men must actually know all the relations they sustain to God and all beings, before they can either be entirely sanctified or know it if they are so. This brother assumes, of course, that a man can be under obligation to fulfill relations which he does not and cannot know himself to sustain. And thus it is, in his opinion, an absurdity to maintain the attainability of this state in the present life.

To this brother it might be said, that if this degree of knowledge be essential to a state of entire sanctification, it never is, and never will be attainable by any being but God; for a knowledge of all our relations must imply absolute omniscience.

Another brother includes in the idea of entire sanctification, the rendering to God all that degree and perfection of service, that might have been rendered by us, if our powers had been fully developed by universal holiness. Hence, he very justly infers, that no such state is attainable in this life. And I add, he might also have said that it will be equally unattainable in the life to come, by those who have neglected their duty here. These must serve as specimens of the manner in which this subject has been treated, and the doctrine of natural ability either expressly denied or its denial strongly implied in their definition of entire sanctification. What does all such arguing as this prove?

I come now to show--

III. What Constitutes Right Character, Or Holiness.

You will remember, that in my last I laid down the position that moral character belongs to and consists in the ultimate choice or intention of the mind. I now remark:

1. That the whole of right character resolves itself into supreme, disinterested benevolence. That is--the ultimate, supreme, disinterested intention to promote, to the utmost extent, the glory of God and the good of the universe, properly constitutes the whole of right character. While this intention, or supreme,

disinterested good-willing remains, there may be mistake, but there cannot be sin. There may be a violation of the letter, but cannot be a violation of the spirit of the law of God. This is self-evident, inasmuch as this state of the will is the very thing and the whole that the law of God requires. This state of will is connected, by a natural necessity, with those outward actions, and inward states of feeling, or of the sensibility, that make up the evidences and constitute the happiness of Christian character. Supreme benevolent intention, or good-willing, is holiness. It is obedience to the law of God. And while this state of the will exists, holy living must exist. While this intention exists no selfishness can possibly co-exist in the same mind. But more of this in a future number.

2. This supreme, disinterested benevolence, good-willing, or good-intending, is all that the law of God demands, or can justly demand of any being. Right character, then, is summed up in one word, LOVE, or in supremely benevolent intention. And now let me say, by supreme love, or supremely benevolent intention, I mean, that it is a sincere and honest intention, or willing, to do the utmost that can be done, to promote the universal good of being--the individual always being left to the exercise of his own judgment under the best light he can obtain, in respect to the particular amount of time, energy, and feeling to be expended at any one moment, or in the discharge of any one particular form of duty--the individual always acting right, whenever he comes up to the best light which, under the circumstances of the case, he can obtain. In other words, when he does, says, omits, just what, under the circumstances he judges to be right.

Here let me anticipate an objection. It is said that Paul "verily thought he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." In answer to this let me say:

(1.) Paul was wholly wrong, because his ultimate intention was wrong.

(2.) His judgment was wrong because his ultimate intention was wrong. He neither intended nor judged according to the best light he had. But suppose his intention had been right, if then he had acted according to the best light he had, which he must have done, if his intention had been right, his conduct would not have been sinful.

Again, it is objected, that the doctrine, that moral character consists in intention, would seem to justify the maxim, that the end sanctifies the means. To this I reply:

(1.) That right character is, by the law of God, made to consist in good-willing or intending. And whatever objection lies against this sentiment, lies against the law of God.

(2.) That a man cannot intend the glory of God and the universal good of being, and knowingly disobey God, as a means for the promotion of this end. It is therefore absurd to say, that good intention can sanctify the use, or make it right to use unlawful or prohibited means.

In concluding this head, let me request you to notice again, in what right character consists--that it belongs to and consists in supreme intention to promote, to the utmost of your ability, the glory of God and the good of the universe; and that, while this intention exists, sin cannot co-exist with it; because the intention is just what, and all that the law of God requires. Outward actions being connected with this intention by a natural necessity. I speak now of the spirit of the law. The letter of the law often requires outward actions, and certain states of the emotions; but the performance of these actions, or the exercise of these emotions are not recognized by the law as obedience; that is--they are not compliance with the spirit and meaning of the law, only as they are the result of perfect and universal benevolence, or a right intention. So that right

character always resolves itself into a compliance with the spirit, and not merely with the letter of the law of God.

IV. What Constitutes Wrong Character.

It has been shown, that character lies in and belongs to the ultimate intention of the mind, and that right character consist in supremely disinterested benevolent intention. Wrong character, then, consists--

1. In any intention or choice, known to be inconsistent with the law of God. In some of the late numbers of the Biblical Repository, Prof. Stuart has shown that sin, all sin, consists in the voluntary transgression of a known law. In those able articles he shows that this is not only the doctrine of the Bible, but has long been held as truth by those whose orthodoxy will not probably be called in question. This sentiment is in precise consistency with the doctrine of natural ability as maintained by the New School divines.

2. Selfishness is wrong character. Selfishness is the preference of self-interest or other considerations over higher interests. It consists in the intending or willing to gratify self, or to promote self-interest, in opposition to the command of the law, to exercise universal benevolence. Selfishness, or self-gratification is always an act of the will, and is always an ultimate intention of the mind, self-interest always being chosen for its own sake, which constitutes it an ultimate intention.

3. Wrong character, or wrong ultimate intention, or selfishness, does not necessarily imply the choice of, or the intention to do what is wrong, because it is wrong; but notwithstanding it is known to be wrong. Selfishness is always a supreme affection or choice of the mind. For, in every selfish choice, the mind chooses what it does in defiance of the authority of God, and in a reckless disregard of the highest interests of the universe.

4. While selfishness exists in the mind, there may be compliance with the letter but never with the spirit of the law of God. Selfishness is the carnal mind, or minding the flesh, "which is enmity against God; which is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."

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

C.G. FINNEY

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