

# **"The Distinction Between Natural and Moral Inability"**

by

**Rev. Joseph Stibbs Christmas**

***"Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life."***

**John 5:40**

***"No man can come unto me except the Father, who has sent me, draw him."***

**John 6:44.**

It will first of all be necessary to have clear conceptions of the distinction between natural and moral ability. *Natural* or *physical* ability is our *power* to do a thing--a power which we have by the very constitution of our *natures*, whether it refer to our mental faculties, or bodily abilities, or our opportunities to use them. *Moral* ability is our *inclination* to do a thing, and it is irrespective of our power. This kind of ability is called *moral*, because the inclination is that on which the moral character of the agent (the good and evil of his actions) depend. Perhaps a few illustrations may convey a better idea of the distinction than can any definition, however accurate.

A man who has the use of his limbs has natural ability to walk; but he may, from some cause operating on his inclination, be unwilling to move a step. He is now morally unable. Again, he may have a great desire to walk and yet not have the use of his limbs. He is in that case morally able to walk but naturally unable to walk. When the mariners in the ship that contained Jonah rowed hard to bring it to land but *could not*, it was through a natural inability. When Joseph's brethren hated him so much that they *could not* speak peaceably to him, it was through a moral inability. It is by a natural inability that a blind man cannot see. It was by a moral inability that some, of whom Peter speaks, had "eyes full of adultery, who *could not* cease from sin" (2 Pet. 2:14). A drunkard has natural ability to abstain from inebriating liquors as well as from any other poison; but when he is unable to restrain himself through strength of appetite, it is a moral inability. It

is an instance of natural inability that men *cannot* make a hair of their head white or black, or add a cubit to their stature. And it is a moral inability that an affectionate child *cannot* deliberately disobey its parents, or that a malicious man *cannot* desire the prosperity of his enemy.

Now though it may sound like an inaccuracy to say that a man is unable to do what he is merely unwilling to do, yet it is a customary way of speaking with all people. How common is it for a person to say that he cannot do that which he is merely strongly averse to doing? I tell you to thrust your hand into the fire. You reply that you cannot; you cannot think of doing such a thing. Now it is evident that you have the natural ability to do it. You can move your hand in the direction of the fire as easily as in any other direction. All you mean by saying that you cannot do it is that you are strongly averse to doing it. In other words, you are morally unable. When you hear a recital of some shameful or cruel conduct, you exclaim, "Oh! *I could not* have acted like that." You do not mean that you have not the powers of body and mind to perpetrate such an atrocity, but that it would have been altogether contrary to your feelings and inclination.

The Bible is written in accordance with this common method of speaking among men. Thus the Redeemer said, "No man *can* come unto me except the Father, who has sent me, draw him." That is, everyone is so strongly averse to coming to me that he *cannot*, or more strictly, *will* not come unto me except the Father draw him; that is, overcome his repugnance by the sweet and powerful constraints of his grace. In exact agreement with this interpretation are these words of Jesus, who never uttered an incautious expression and who was always perfectly consistent with himself, "Ye *will* not come unto me that he might have life," a declaration which in the original still more emphatically attributes their not coming to a lack of will (whereas the English auxiliary verb generally implies nothing more than the certain futuration of the event: "Ye are *not willing* to come unto me that ye might have life").

Having stated and explained the distinction between natural and moral ability, I observe that the inability which prevents a sinner from embracing the Gospel must be of the one kind or the other; and I

maintain that it is of the latter kind--that all men are naturally able to come to God, and that the only reason why they do not is that they are morally unable or unwilling to do so.

Here at the very outset we are met with a prejudice of many against all such distinctions. According to them, these distinctions are a mere metaphysical refinement which few can understand and, if understood, of no importance; for if men are unable, they are unable whether it arises from a physical or moral cause. Now, if anyone chooses to do so, he is at liberty to call the distinction subtle and unduly theoretical. But it is a distinction still, obvious to persons of every capacity; and its importance is daily felt in the transactions of society.

For instance, if one of your children broke some valuable article, would it be nothing more than a metaphysical nicety in you to ask whether it was broken by accident or whether it was done wantonly and willingly? Does not the child himself perceive the distinction and, if he can, avail himself of that distinction by pleading that he did not break it on purpose but broke it by accident? And is not this the very distinction between natural and moral ability? Again, when a criminal is arraigned at court for killing a fellow man, is it a matter of too much metaphysical nicety for the jury to inquire whether it was an accident that could not be helped or a willful murder that had been freely intended? In other words, whether it proceeded from a natural or a moral inability to do otherwise?

The distinction is no less important than it is obvious. Does your child think this distinction is of no importance towards establishing his innocence? And would he not justly complain if you punished him as severely for an oversight or accident as for wanton and intentional mischief? And if such were your general procedure, would he not lose all confidence in your justice? And might not the accused man at the bar bitterly complain of the judge who should refuse to make such a distinction, saying that if the man was killed then he was killed, and it would not alter the outcome to determine whether it was done intentionally or accidentally?

And why should it be deemed of no importance to ascertain whether

men's continuance in sin be from a natural inability which they cannot help or from a moral inability which they will not help? Men indeed continue in sin whether the cause be of a natural or moral kind. But is the distinction of no importance towards determining their guilt? No man who thinks at all can think so.

Sinners without exception do perceive the bearing of the question, and when urged with the immediate obligation of duty, they attempt to fasten the blame of non-compliance upon their natural inability. They perceive that if their inability can be shown to proceed from their moral inability or unwillingness, then they are stripped of every cloak for their sin. They are quick to discern that the distinction forces upon them an irresistible conviction of guilt, which they would gladly avoid. So long as they can excuse themselves by throwing the blame on something beyond their control, they rest easy.

For this reason there is a rooted aversion to the doctrine of moral inability, which must forcibly strike the mind of everyone who has conversed much with impenitent persons on the subject of their personal obligations; and hence their unwillingness to admit a truth that shows their hiding place to be a refuge of lies.

But they *must* see it if they are ever to be brought to a state of conviction. I know of no doctrine of such deep and practical importance as this. Without it, I should be perfectly unable to justify the way of God to man. I should feel myself in the situation of one of Pharaoh's taskmasters, and rather than hear the keen retort, "There is no straw given unto thy servants to make brick," and be sensible that it was well founded, I would resign the service. Without it, I should not know how to acquit the ever blessed God of being a hard master, gathering where he had not scattered seed and reaping where he had not sown.

We will now attend to the evidence that directly proves that men have natural ability perfectly to love and obey God and comply with the gospel.

I argue it from the fact that *God has commanded it*. It will not be doubted, first, that the Supreme Lawgiver enjoins men to love him

with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength, and their neighbor as themselves; second, that he commands all men everywhere to repent and return to him with their whole heart; third, that he commands them to believe the gospel under pain of damnation; and, fourth, that he commands them to be holy even as he is holy and to have holy and new hearts, that is, to be in the possession of holy feelings without delay.

"Circumcise yourselves," says he, "and take away the foreskins of your hearts ye men of Jerusalem and inhabitants of Judah." "O Jerusalem! wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be saved." "Cast away your transgression, whereby ye offend, and *make you a new heart and a new spirit*, for why will ye die?" "Repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his *thoughts*." "*Rend your hearts*, and not your garments," "*purify your hearts*, ye double minded." "And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his son Jesus Christ, and love one another."

To these might be added a vast many other passages, indeed all the precepts of Scripture which enjoin holiness in general or some of its particular branches.

Now I appeal to you whether God will ever command what it is impossible for men to perform. Can you for a moment suppose that the Judge of all the earth will require of men what is beyond their strength, and require it under the penalty of his everlasting displeasure? If so, then indeed are the complaints of the strictness of God's law which sinners make against him be well-founded. And can you believe that men are in the right and Jehovah's conduct infinitely in the wrong? "Far be it from God, that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty, that he should commit iniquity!" "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with him? God forbid! Yea, let God be true and every man a liar." Whatever be the consequence, with Elihu we will "ascribe righteousness to our Maker."

We are now prepared to see the force of the following argument: God will not command what men are unable to perform. But he does command men to love him, repent, and embrace the gospel. Therefore men are able to love him, repent, and embrace the gospel.

There are two ways in which men attempt to evade the force of this reasoning. The first is, that we originally *had the ability in Adam, that we lost it in him, and that God's right to command still continues notwithstanding our inability to obey.*

In answer to this objection, I would first state that I have no disposition to deny that Adam's conduct *somehow* involved us in very important consequences (the Scriptures themselves have not explained *how*, nor have any of their expositors succeeded in becoming wise above what is written). It has brought us into that state in which every human being is born and, unless sovereign grace interpose, grows up with a heart opposed to his duty and to God. But it cannot with propriety be affirmed that the fall has deprived us of power to keep the commands of God. If it has, then our probation and responsibility came to an end in Adam and there is no such thing as *actual sin* in the world. If we lost our power to obey in our first parent, then our probation and responsibility came to an end in him. I do not know of any principle plainer than that accountability is founded on power to obey, or of any principle more absurd than that a creature who is incapable of acting should be put on probation.

That natural ability is the foundation of responsibility is evident from the fact that the increase of natural ability confers a proportional increase of responsibility. This is everywhere taught in the word of God. He who receives five talents has five times the responsibility of him who receives but one. "The servant who knows his master's will and does it not shall be beaten with many stripes." "If I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin." If an increase of responsibility follows an increase of power, then some degree of power is necessary to constitute the commencement of responsibility. But if we lost all our power in Adam, then we have no responsibility.

Does not God, however, still deem us accountable, and does he not declare that the welfare of our eternity shall be determined by our

*own present* conduct? Nay, does he not lay the whole stress on our own personal character; and can it be shown that anyone was ever lost for Adam's sin?

Again, if we lost in Adam all power to obey, then there is no such thing as actual transgression in the world; for the loss of power takes away all capacity for sinning. As sin is a breach of obligation and obligation is founded on power, there can be no sin where there is no power. If we had power in Adam, we were then responsible and capable of sinning. If that power was destroyed in his transgression, we thenceforth became forever incapable of actual transgression, and there has been no sin committed in the world since our common ancestor plucked the forbidden fruit.

You perceive the absurdity involved in the supposition. This throwing the fault on the transgression of Adam is only reviving a proverb for which God so severely reprov'd the Jews: "Our father have eaten sour grapes, and their children's teeth are set on edge." Has not God decided the question by saying, "All souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine." "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself."

We may further illustrate that present ability is the only ground of present obligation to keep the commands of God in the following manner. Upon the declaration of war, a citizen mutilates his body in order that he may not be drafted into military service. Now the man deserves to be punished to the full extent of his guilt for incapacitating himself for the service of his country. But after he has become mutilated, it would not be right to require him to perform the service of an able-bodied man and punish him for not rendering it. He deserves punishment for cutting off his foot, for instance, but it would be tyrannical to require him to walk after it was cut off.

In like manner, if Adam deliberately deprived himself and all his posterity of the power of future obedience when he first sinned, then for *that* sin he richly deserved to be punished. But it would not be equitable to require any further obedience of him. He is to blame for

the one act by which he destroyed his power to walk in the ways of obedience, but he is not to blame for not walking in them after he lost the power to do so. However, it is evident that God did require obedience of Adam after his fall and still requires holy obedience of his fallen descendants, which upon every principle of equity proves that though they have lost the will to obey, they did not lose the power on which every just command is founded.

The second way in which men evade the force of the argument for natural ability (as it is inferred from the commands of God) is by saying *that though we are not able to obey, God has promised to give strength to those who ask him*. They maintain that the character of God is cleared from the imputation of commanding an impossibility by the promise of supernatural strength to those who ask him for it.

To this evasion I have four objections, each of which to my mind appears substantial.

1. It *mistakes the nature of that strength which the grace of God confers*. The influences of the Spirit do not communicate any new physical strength to the faculties of the mind. Sin does not consist in a weak understanding, memory, or judgment. Nor does grace strengthen any old faculty or communicate any new one. It merely leads to a right use of what is already possessed. It inclines its subject to do what he was previously able to do. After conversion a person has no better talents and no other powers of body or mind than what he had while unconverted. But this he has--a different disposition, a new inclination to lay himself out for the glory of God. The evasion then is incorrect in stating that man stands in need of, and asking shall receive, that which the grace of God never confers, namely, new natural ability for the performance of duty.

2. The evasion is objectionable inasmuch as it *involves the contradiction of supposing that in order to obtain grace the sinner does that which it is morally impossible for him to do until he first has grace*. It supposes that before he can repent he must pray for grace, while it is certain that he cannot pray for grace without having first repented.

What does the asking for grace mentioned in the evasion mean? A mere utterance of the words of prayer? Surely that will not be advocated. Or does it mean the acceptable prayer of sincerity and faith? But that prayer is never offered by the unrenewed man, nor can it be offered while he continues in such a state. The evasion supposes God to have given a law which man cannot keep without grace, that grace is only to be obtained by prayer, and yet prayer always presupposes grace! It attributes to God the conduct of a doctor who should command a man without legs to walk. When the man complains of the command on account of his inability, the doctor alleviates his situation by commanding the man to walk to him, and then he would give him the power of walking!

3. I object to the evasion on the ground that if it be true that a man cannot repent without supernatural strength, and that this strength can only be obtained by asking God for it, *then the only thing which the sinner is obligated to do is to ask*. His whole duty is narrowed down to that one act. He is not obligated to repent before he asks, for upon the supposition he is unable. Nor is he obligated to repent after he asks, for if God hears his prayer he already repents; and if God does not hear his prayer, then he cannot help it.

4. I object to the evasion in that it is *derogatory to the character of God and undermines the nature of grace*. It supposes the Supreme to have given a law which men cannot keep; and then to clear himself, he promises grace to help them out. It makes the divine procedure like that of a king who should levy a tax beyond the resources of his subjects, and should then justify himself by permitting them to draw enough from the royal treasury to satisfy the demand. Such a procedure is no less subversive of the character of grace. The very term *grace* implies that it is purely gratuitous and might be justly withheld. But if grace is *necessary* for obedience, then justice obliges God to confer it, and grace is no more grace but a mere debt.

It still remains true (for nothing has yet appeared to the contrary) that the sinner has power to love God, repent, and embrace the gospel according to the commandments of the Most High. This truth is confirmed by many positive texts of Scripture, which attribute the impenitence of sinners not to a lack of ability but to a lack of

inclination, or the depravity of the will.

"Oh foolish people and without understanding, who *have eyes and see not, who have ears and hear not.*" "Son of man! You dwell in the midst of a rebellious people, which *have eyes to see and see not; they have ears to hear and hear not; for they are a rebellious house.*" "Bring forth the *blind* people who *have eyes*, and the *deaf* who *have ears.*" "They are like the deaf adder that *stops her ears*, which will not hearken to the voice of the charmers, charming never so wisely." "But bring here those enemies of mine who *did not want* me to reign over them, and slay them before me." "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men *love* darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. *For everyone who does evil hates the light, neither comes to the light lest his deeds should be reproved.*" "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and ye *would not.*" "Ye *will not* come to me that ye might have life."

All these texts ascribe the sinner's impenitence to a voluntary disinclination and not to a lack of ability. But here we shall be told that there is another class of texts which assert his positive disability, such as these:

"No man *can* come to me except the Father who has sent me draw him." "How *can* ye, being evil, speak good things?" "How *can* ye believe, who receive honor one of another and seek not the honor which comes from God only?" "Having eyes full of adultery, which *cannot* cease from sin." "The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God; neither *can* he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

The remarks already made have given us a clue, I trust, to the meaning of such passages, passages which must be interpreted in accordance with the other texts already adduced, since the Bible nowhere contradicts itself. When the Redeemer says "no man *can*

come to me," he himself interprets it by saying "ye *will not* come to me that ye might have life." Instances without number may be adduced from the inspired volume in which the word *cannot* is used to denote nothing more than a strong disinclination:

"Hurry, escape there," said the angel to Lot, "for I *cannot* do anything until you arrive there." "The tabernacle of the LORD and the altar of burnt offering . . . were at Gibeon. But David *could not* go before it to inquire of God, for he was *afraid* of the sword of the angel of the LORD." "*Can* that which is unsavory be eaten without salt?" "My iniquities have taken hold of me, so that I am *not able* to look up." "I am so troubled that I *cannot* speak." "The Lord GOD has spoken, who *can* but prophesy?" "This is a hard saying, who *can* hear it?" Joseph's brethren hated him, and "*could not* speak peaceably unto him."

But are not sinners compared to dry bones--very dry--in the valley of vision? Can anything more fully express an entire destitution of power and life? And natural men too are said to be "dead in trespasses and sins." What power can be attributed to the dead?

Upon a little reflection, all this will be seen to sanction a very satisfactory explanation. Sinners are as destitute of every holy feeling and every gracious emotion in the same way that the dry and scattered bones of those long dead are destitute of every vestige of animation. They can no more be renewed and sanctified by any application of means than crumbling skeletons can hearken to the prophet's call and awaken to life. In like manner, to be dead in trespasses is to be destitute of all the vitality of holiness. It does not mean to be lacking in capacity for holy duties, for capacity for duty is implied in the exhortation, "O dry bones! hear the word of the LORD," and in the call to the unconverted, "Awake, you that sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." Being *dead in sin* necessarily implies being *alive to sin*. It implies that if the exercise of those faculties and powers were employed in a different way, there would be a new life unto righteousness.

I will briefly notice one last objection to this doctrine: If no man ever

did or ever will become holy without the supernatural influences of the Spirit, how can it be said with any propriety that men have the natural ability to become holy of themselves?

Let me answer by asking a question. What is it that makes the influences of the Spirit necessary in any case? Is it that men have no natural faculties or power to obey God? Or is it because they willingly choose not to use them, having an aversion so strong that it will never give way until the Almighty Spirit makes them willing, an aversion so universal that no one ever has or will exist without it? I leave you to judge now whether it be a fair inference that because all men are thus obstinately unwilling to do their duty that therefore no man is able to do it. The fact that everyone who becomes a Christian becomes such by the influences of the Spirit does not touch the question of man's natural power; but it only proves the universality of this unwillingness--a truth which is not in dispute.

Having thus proved, I trust, that all men have natural ability to obey God, and that the only reason why they do not is purely voluntary (or in other words their unwillingness), and having answered such objections to the doctrine as I am acquainted with, I proceed to deduce and illustrate a few practical inferences.

1. If men have power to obey God, *the lack of a disposition to do so is no excuse for disobedience*, and therefore God may justly condemn them for lack of a right disposition. When sinners are urged to the duties of repentance, faith, and love to God, they very frequently plead that they have no heart for them, leaving us to infer that they are not to be blamed for their impenitence because God has not given them a different heart. My objective is to show, under this first point, the perfect futility of this common plea.

First, the Most High never blames man for the lack of talents which he has not given him, nor does God require the improvement of talents which he has not given. But a talent entrusted lays a foundation for the obligation to improve it, and gives God a right to demand its improvement. The natural ability which God confers on men when he endows them with all the qualifications for moral agency constitutes a good reason why they should employ that ability in a right manner,

that is, as the Creator commands. If men have power to obey, their lack of inclination to do so is no reasonable plea why they should be excused from it.

But it has been proved that men have power to obey; and the inference from this is that their lack of disposition to obey is not only no excuse but the very ground of their condemnation. It is an inference so clear that it would seem superfluous to add anything further, were it not for the fact that this truth is daily denied by saints and sinners.

In human society the mere lack of disposition is never considered a valid plea for the non-performance of duty. If a citizen rebels against his king, it will not help him in the least to say that he never had, and never will have, right feelings toward him. His disloyal and treasonable disposition is the ground of his condemnation. If a servant who is in health and fully able to work refuses to be industrious, will his master consider it a reasonable excuse that he claims he does not love to work and feels too indolent for labor? If a child pleads a lack of love and respect for his parent as a reason for his disobedience, will his parent absolve him from his filial obligations on that ground? No more is it reasonable for a sinner to expect that our heavenly King, Master, and Father will release him from his obligations to obedience just because he has no disposition to obey.

Second, if lack of a disposition to obey can be used as an excuse for any disobedience, then God has no right to punish any creature for any transgression; for the moment any holy being sins he loses his disposition to obey, and thus whenever he is called to an account he may plead his lack of disposition. If that plea be valid, the Supreme Lawgiver has nothing more to say. He must let him pass with impunity for all sins. And then, upon this principle, whenever a man sins he places himself beyond the reach of justice! Upon this principle, then, if the whole moral universe of God should rebel against him this moment, they would effectually place themselves beyond the obligations of his law and the control of his government, for they could all then plead a lack of disposition.

Upon this principle, the Judge of all can never call an offender to a

reckoning, and all the penalties in his law denounced against transgression are mere empty threats. This monstrous principle at once strikes at the foundations of Jehovah's throne and denies his right to reign at all. And yet it is involved in the excuse perpetually put forth by men when they claim they have no disposition to do better than they do.

Third, if the excuse be at all valid, then reasoning dictates that the more sinful a man becomes the less deserving he is of punishment; for if a disinclination to duty is a justifiable excuse why a man should not be punished for its neglect, then a stronger disinclination is a stronger reason why he should not be punished for it. In other words, as the disinclination increases in strength, the excuse increases in validity; that is, the more deeply sinful a man becomes the less deserving is he of condemnation.

Fourth, if God has no right to demand a holy disposition of those who have it not, then he has no right to demand anything of them. He has no right to demand natural ability or power from those to whom he has not communicated those talents. Neither will it be said that it would be right for him to demand wickedness or an unholy disposition. The only other thing that he can demand is holiness, or a holy heart; and if he may not justly demand *that* of those who have it not (which, if the excuse be valid, he may not), then the Most High has absolutely no right to demand anything of the sinner.

Fifth, if this excuse be a good one, then there is no such thing as sin in the world; for all sin may be reduced to a lack of right disposition. If men are not to be blamed for this, then they are not to be blamed for anything. Thus there is no blameworthy creature in existence.

Sixth, in offering this excuse, sinners necessarily condemn the ever-blessed God. Just like the unprofitable servant who hid his master's talent, they come into his presence and say, "Lord! I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed." In presenting this excuse, a man throws all the blame on God, who *does* demand your heart, though you have no disposition to give it, and threatens you with endless misery if you do not comply. Now if your excuse is good, God is requiring what is not

right; nay, he is doing you an infinite wrong in threatening infinite woe. With your self-justifying pleas, you by implication charge God.

Seventh, you never accept such a plea from someone else when you are the injured party. When a fellow man hates you and causes distress, you do not deem him excused because he pleads that he has no kindly disposition toward you. What reason then can you give why God should accept such a plea from you? But consider also, are there not times when your conscience speaks out and condemns you for doing certain things, although when you did them you had no disposition to do otherwise? Take for example the profligate man who is overtaken with shame, poverty, and disease. He now bitterly condemns himself, although in his life of licentiousness he had no disposition to do otherwise. So too the convicted sinner condemns himself when he sees the fatal consequences of transgression, though at the time of his disobedience he had no disposition to do otherwise. The sons of Jacob after they had abused their brother Joseph, Pharaoh after he persisted in refusing to emancipate the Israelites, Saul after he had spared the Amalekites, and Judas after he had betrayed innocent blood--all condemned themselves for their conduct even though they had no disposition to act differently at the time.

And all sinners sooner or later, either when the light of conviction shall pour upon their hearts in this world or the light of eternity break upon their vision in the next, will perceive the falseness of their plea; and being stripped of every excuse and condemned, they shall bitterly lament that they ever attempted to make one.

Far better it is to acknowledge your guilt at once and no longer try to fortify yourselves against a sense of blame. So long as you succeed in soothing your consciences with the belief that you can be excused for your lack of holiness, you are proof against conviction of guilt. Be willing to see yourselves as you are and acknowledge what you see. Like self-condemned traitors, go and throw yourselves upon the mercy of the king, before a legal investigation shall extort the confession of treasonable guilt and redemption of your souls shall be lost forever.

The doctrine of man's natural ability has been made to bear upon the case of the unconverted sinner. It has been shown that in possessing

power to obey, his lack of inclination admits of no possible excuse. It now remains to show that it has an equal bearing upon the case of the converted saint.

God not only commands that the sinner should repent and embrace the gospel, but that the saint should be perfectly holy; and, so far as he comes short of it, he is inexcusable on the same ground that the unreconciled sinner is inexcusable. Natural ability to perform our whole duty is the basis of the sinner's obligation to repent and be perfectly holy, as it is of the saint (who has repented) to be perfectly holy. And the only reason why no one on earth, either saint or sinner, is perfectly holy is that no one on earth has a perfect inclination to be so.

Now as saints and sinners possess the same natural ability to be holy, the saint is no more excusable for his varying and imperfect inclination than the sinner is for his total lack of a right one. The servant who works lazily in his master's employment is reprehensible on the same ground, though not to the same extent, with the servant who will not work at all. And yet many Christians speak and feel as though they were not aware of this. They look back upon the days before they were saved and heartily condemn their character as inexcusable; yet they see but little guilt in not being now vastly more holy than they are. They reason much like the impenitent man when they speak of the strength of their corruptions as something which they cannot help, and excuse themselves in the lack of more intensely holy feelings because God has not given them larger measures of his grace.

Now they are blameworthy, not merely on the ground that their careless walk and lack of devotion have deprived them of the larger effusions of the Spirit (which remedy the wrong disposition of the heart), but on the broader basis of their natural ability, which at all times obliges them, as accountable beings, to be perfectly holy and not merely partially so.

Hence the children of God ought to feel (1) that they should be perfect even as their Father in heaven is perfect, knowing that every degree of shortcoming is inexcusable, because it does not arise from a lack of

power but from lack of a right disposition; (2) that God has a right to demand their perfection on the ground of their ability without giving the influences of his Spirit; (3) that such is their guilty disinclination to perfect holiness that it never will be overcome except by the sovereign and almighty power of the Spirit; and (4) that all their desires to achieve perfect holiness, so long as they are not perfectly holy like the sinner's desires after repentance, are not proper, direct, and sincere.

2. If men possess natural ability to do and to be all that God requires, it follows that they are not passive in regeneration.

The common opinion is that depravity consists in a depraved heart existing prior to depraved feelings; that it is a constitutional and physical depravity independent of our will; and that the regeneration that remedies it is a miraculous creation of a new nature from which holy feelings spring, the production of a new faculty which the sinner never possessed before, and the infusion of a new principle which must be possessed in order to render him capable of holy feelings. But this common opinion is inconsistent with the doctrine of man's natural ability to do all that God requires. In other words, the doctrine of man's natural ability undermines such an idea as his passivity in regeneration.

God commands men to make themselves new hearts and a new spirit. He makes it their duty to be regenerate. And men have natural ability to do and to be all that God commands. But if regeneration be the creation of a new physical faculty, an operation in which man is passive, then man has no ability to be regenerate; for if God requires that of us in which we are *passive*, he requires *nothing* of us. He requires that we should be *acted upon*, not that *we should act*. But it is evident that the prevalent idea of passivity in regeneration quite mistakes the nature of that change. It attributes moral character to something which exists prior to the voluntary active exercises of the soul, for which alone conscience and Scripture declare us responsible.

All that the divine law requires is love: "Love is the fulfilling of the law," "The fruit of the Spirit is love." To make a new heart means nothing more than to exercise holy love. And is a man passive in the

exercise of holy love? The experience of all who have ever become regenerate is that they are not conscious of the creation of any new power, of the infusion of any new principle in which they were passive. Rather, they are merely sensible of the exercise of new holy feelings; feelings which they know indeed they would never have chosen to exercise if left to themselves, and yet as truly voluntary and active as those unholy feelings exercised before. They act in being acted upon.

It cannot be shown in what respect the first holy exercise differs from any of the subsequent ones, except in its being the first. And if a saint is active in all his subsequent holy exercises of mind, what reason can be assigned why he is not active in the first? The same power which began holiness in his heart must perpetuate it, and as the saint is active in maintaining holiness, so is he active in commencing holiness.

If men are naturally able to do their whole duty, nothing but their unwillingness keeps them from it. If they were willing, if they had holy inclinations, then their duty would be performed and the first exercise of it would be their regeneration. But is it not evident that they would be active in this? Is a man passive in willing to be holy or in holy inclinations? Men are not bound to possess the influences of the Spirit of God. These influences they cannot command; they are dispensed in uncontrollable sovereignty. But they are bound to possess those holy feelings which that Spirit produces. They are bound to have new hearts, that is, holiness.

So long as men think that regeneration is some miraculous operation in which they are passive, that it must of necessity be brought about by an agent which they cannot command--in other words, so long as the new heart is supposed to be anything other than the first exercise of holy feelings--men will deny their natural ability to be holy, repel all exhortations to be converted, and never feel the force of the obligation to make them new hearts and a new spirit.

3. If sinners are naturally able to comply with their duty and yet are unwilling to do it, then we are furnished with a satisfactory reconciliation of those passages of Scripture which speak of repentance, faith, and love as *man's duty* with those passages which speak of them as *God's gift*. It explains the consistency of men being

in some places commanded to make them new hearts, and the new heart in other places stated as being the work of the Spirit and the gift of God.

In the first place, men by the very possession of natural ability are laid under obligations to be holy. The natural talents with which God has entrusted them they *ought* to improve by the exercise of holy affections. And what they ought to do, God has a right to command them to do. It is therefore right in God to command men to love him, to repent and believe in Christ. Their power to do so lays them under obligations to do so, from which they can in no wise be excused. And hence the propriety of speaking of love, repentance, and faith as *man's duty* and urging him to its immediate performance.

But in the next place, though this is man's duty, he is obstinately unwilling to do it; and that is his depravity. Urge him to do it, ply him with all the inducements which the whole magazine of truth affords and in all the ways which the whole system of means can present them, and he will refuse. The wicked will continue to do wickedly. Though Christ most tenderly invites him, he will not go unto him that he might have life.

Now God, who sees him in this guilty frame of mind, perceives that he can remove his obstinacy by the almighty influence of his Spirit upon the heart and make him willing to love, repent, and believe. And when he does it, he is said to *give* him love, repentance, and faith. But is it not clear, first, that what God has given him he was bound of himself to have, and that the exercises of love, repentance, and faith, which are God's gift, were his duty before God gave them; and, second, that it would have been right to have urged him to relinquish his obstinacy before God subdued him by his grace and made him willing in the day of his power, and if God had never done so, it would still have been his unalterable duty to be willing?

Hence we see the propriety of exhorting sinners to repentance and holiness of heart, for they are bound to it independently of the grace of God; while another portion of revealed truth assures us that if they ever do repent and become holy, it will be in consequence of repentance given and holiness communicated by the sovereign and

free Spirit of God. Hence we see the reason why God, as a *moral governor*, invariably demands holiness, and in some instances as a *sovereign* confers it. Thus is it consistent in him to urge all sinners to make them new hearts, and in some instances to give them new hearts. Thus, what in all cases is man's duty is in some cases God's gift.

4. If men have natural ability to embrace the gospel and are not willing to do it, the destruction of the non-elect is to be attributed entirely to themselves.

It has been constantly urged by the supporters of Arminianism that if none *possibly can* embrace the gospel except those on whom a sovereign God confers his grace, then the rest of mankind--the non-elect--are placed under a hard and invincible necessity of being forever lost. And the objection is unanswerable. If such be the condition of the non-elect, all the reasoning and scripture in the world cannot silence the irrepressible dictates of common sense. If those on whom God does not intend, and therefore does not bestow grace, have no power to embrace the gospel, then it is a hard truth that they should perish for not embracing it.

It serves no purpose to say that they are justly condemned for their transgression of the law, and had no right to expect that God should ever provide a Savior or place pardon within their reach. The whole of this is granted. If indeed the non-elect are treated as the mere transgressors of the law, and never having had mercy offered die without the guilt of its rejection, it must be allowed there is no injustice done them. They justly perish like the devils, without excuse and without the offer of pardon.

But is this a scriptural view of their situation, at least of those of them who perish amid the light of the gospel? Is not the word of this salvation, which was commanded to be preached to every creature, sent to them also? Are they not the prisoners of hope as well as others? The word which Christ spoke, shall that not judge them, and are they not condemned for not receiving the gospel? And how can we answer him who inquires into the equity of condemning the non-elect for not doing what they have no power to do?

The objection, I repeat, is unanswerable. So long as the natural inability of the sinner is maintained, the Arminian may strike a blow at the vitals of Calvinism, which no skill can parry. It was this unfounded idea of the sinner's impotence in every sense, held by Hill, Toplady, and others in the famous controversy which took place in Great Britain about the middle of the last century, that gave such an advantage to Wesley, Fletcher, and their coadjutors, when they appealed to the equitable feelings of mankind. While the former men founded the doctrine of sovereign and unconditional election upon indisputable testimonies of the word of God, they also connected it with a view of human ability so subversive of justice that the latter men, thinking that the *doctrine* and the *view* must stand or fall together, and seeing the horrid consequences of the view, soon persuaded themselves that the doctrine was not contained in any of those texts in which it is so incontrovertibly declared.

The friends of election maintained that no man *possibly can embrace* the gospel without the grace of God. But had they instead maintained that to a *certainty no man will believe* without the influences of the Spirit, and that his impenitence and unbelief arise from no obstacle but an obstinate and voluntary rejection of mercy and aversion to holiness, a breach as great as the sea would probably not have been made--a breach which has not been healed to this day.

It would then have been seen that an interest in the great salvation is placed within the reach of all, and that men in rejecting it are not controlled by an impossibility or fatality but *choose death, become the authors of their own destruction*, and are justly condemned. And it would then have been admitted by all the truly pious that though all continue to reject salvation with a desperate obstinacy, God has power to remove that obstinacy and make them willing in the day of his power, without destroying or interfering with the freedom of their will; and that he has a right to exercise that power on whom he chooses according to the good pleasure of his will, and that the discrimination does no injury to those who are passed by.

This inference would then have appeared easy to most of those who now hold contrary views: That what God does he must have intended

to do; and that if it is right for God *in time* to bestow on some that grace which he might justly have withheld from all, then it was right in God *from eternity* to make that selection, and design to confer that grace.

5. If men possess natural ability to turn to God and nothing prevents them but their unwillingness, then it is a wicked thing in them to be waiting God's time, till he shall by the influences of his Spirit turn them.

The moment you know your duty, you are bound to perform it. "To him who knows to do good and does it not, to him it is sin." To continue in the neglect of duty when no impediment stands in the way is wicked. But how much more wicked is it to neglect it for such reasons and with such feelings as these: "I know that it is my duty to love and obey God, and that it is reasonable and proper that I should. But I am determined not to do so until God the Holy Spirit shall at some time overpower my repugnance and make me do it. He can do it if he pleases, as he has done it for many unwilling sinners besides myself. I will, therefore, wait his own time. I will continue to offend him till he conquers me by his grace. I will prolong my ungodly contest with him till he makes me drop my weapons. And if his time should never come, if he never subdues my obstinacy in the day of his power, I will continue his enemy till I die."

Now this is, by a fair construction, the feeling of those who are unwilling to turn to God and are waiting for God's time to turn them by the irresistible influences of his Spirit. It may be presenting the subject in a little more glaring and obvious light than you have been accustomed to view it, but it is all involved in a willingness to neglect religion until you can no longer help attending to it, and in your intention to continue impenitent until God shall arise in his power and break and subdue and change your heart.

And what, my friend, if God's time should never come? Are you willing to risk the welfare of your eternity upon the certainty of such an event? This thing is certain--that God's time will never come while you continue to think as you do. It will never come until you feel that you cannot defer your duty any longer, until the pressing conviction is

urged upon your mind that "now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation."

Now *is* God's accepted time; the only time that you may ever know. "Today, then, if you will hear his voice, harden not your heart." And will you still maintain the controversy with your Maker by pleading that you have *no natural ability* to obey? No! You cannot do that as long as God is just and commands obedience, as long as the Scriptures are true and attribute your impenitence to a voluntary and chosen disinclination and not to a lack of power.

Or acknowledging your natural ability to obey, will you still plead your *lack of disposition* as a sufficient excuse? What! Plead that as an excuse which is never accepted in human society; which denies God the right to punish any creature upon his revolt against his government; which would prove that the more sinful you become the less deserving of punishment you are; which virtually denies God's right to demand anything of his creatures; which would disprove the existence of any moral evil in the universe; which carries with it the highest impeachment of the divine equity; which you would reject with indignation were it offered you by a fellow man; which in the lucid intervals of your moral perception you cannot accept from yourself; and one too which, if persisted in, will be ruinous by precluding you from all conviction of guilt, and is incompatible with that feeling of self-condemnation which must precede the extension of mercy toward you?

And do you now say that even though you are convicted that your excuse is inexcusable, it still does not alter your disposition? You still have no heart to repent, so how can you? What would you think of a child who wantonly and impudently offended his parent, and that aggrieved parent came and told him to be sorry for what he had done. The child replies that he does not feel like it, that he has no heart to repent. Would you not think that he was adding obstinacy to insult? Now the parent again urges upon him the duty to repent, but the child pleads his impenitent disposition as an excuse, and then inquires how he was to get a better spirit. Would you not say he was obligated to have a better spirit, and that his pressing such an excuse and asking such a question was only evidence of the continuance of his depraved

inclination, that the plea was futile and aggravating and only added insult to obstinacy? You are acting towards God in an exactly similar manner, and in a similar light he regards your self-justification.

But you claim you are offering no excuse--"I am convinced that I am guilty and inexcusable, that my very plea might justly be made the ground of my condemnation; but still my heart does not relent. May I not by my prayers insure that grace will come to change my disposition? If I continue to pray, will not God give me another heart?" No! You have no assurance that he will. If he does, it will not be in answer to your prayers; much less can your praying insure it. Repentance is your primary and indispensable duty. This is the first step you can make towards the performance of your duty and the enjoyment of God's favor. Until this is done, nothing is done.

A citizen rebels against a wise and good sovereign. Pardon is proclaimed on condition that he throw down his arms and submit. Now it will avail him little if he sends flattering messages to his sovereign, writes the most friendly addresses to the throne, or acts the most kindly part toward his fellow subjects, so long as he continues in arms and refuses to submit. If he is arrested in this condition, he will be treated and condemned as a rebel.

You have in like manner rebelled against the King of kings, who has sent you a proclamation of mercy on condition of repentance and submission. It will avail you nothing should you offer the most importunate prayers, diligently use the means of grace, and behave in the most exemplary manner toward your fellow men as long as you have not first repented and submitted to God. Until you do this, every prayer you offer is mockery, every means you use is making you worse and worse. Not only does praying without repentance leave you in a state of condemnation, but impenitent prayers, however long continued, will not avail to procure repentance either by any intrinsic efficacy of their own or by virtue of any promise that God has given in his word.

There is not in the whole compass of the Scriptures one word of encouragement to any exertions of anyone while he continues impenitent and unconverted. Without repentance you may pray till

your last breath expires and read the Scriptures till the mists of death settle on your vision, and God may not give you grace at the end. And it will be no more an imputation on the character of the Supreme that he allowed an awakened person to die without mercy than that he lets thousands of careless persons die without awakening. In short, with the word of God for my guide, I dare not direct you to pray before repentance and as a means of getting it; for that would be to direct you to offer an impenitent prayer. It would be directing you to prolong your rebellion by substituting an insulting mockery for genuine submission.

We must adhere to the record and beseech you to be reconciled to God on his terms and without delay. We must press your duties and call on you to cast away all your transgressions whereby you offend, to make for yourself a new heart and a new spirit. As far as all your professions of desiring holiness, your exertions after conversion, and your persevering prayers are concerned, we must bring you back to your indispensable duty and ask, "Do you love God? Do you repent of sin? Do you believe in Christ?"

"No, I do not. I cannot." What! Is there nothing in the character of the infinitely glorious and blessed God that you can admire and love? Is there no form or comeliness in Christ that you cannot desire him? Oh, what a wicked heart is yours that I must plead the rights of God with you; and after all is said, you should say that you cannot love him. The very first apprehension of his being and character should be enough to fire up your hearts. You can love the world. You can love contemptible pleasures and sinful fellowmen. You can love your guilty and polluted selves. You can love *sin!*--the most loathsome thing in the universe. And then you plead that you cannot love God? Hear, oh heavens, and be astonished, oh earth!

"How can I repent?" I answer, how can you help not repenting? If you loved God, it would be an immediate and spontaneous emotion of your heart. You would take a sacred pleasure in indulging your grief before God. You would feel as though you should choose to go sorrowing to your grave and then up to the world where Jesus is. How can you help not repenting! Is it not the most rational thing in the world? Can you think of sin and its exceeding sinfulness without being

filled with self-aborrence? Can you look upon him whom your sins have pierced without your eyes affecting your heart?

"How can I believe in Christ?" How is it that you have been able to live so long without believing in him? How have you contrived to remain at ease in your condemned situation, refusing Christ's offered and finished salvation, despising the bleeding love of Christ, rejecting the Savior's kind invitations, doubting his gracious assurances, and exposing yourselves to all the consequences of incurring the wrath of the Lamb? Would to God that he would arise and make you feel as though you *could* no longer disbelieve.

This excerpt is from "A Discourse on the Nature of That Inability Which Prevents the Sinner from Embracing the Gospel: Being the Substance of Two Sermons Preached in The American Presbyterian Church, Montreal, Dec. 9, 1827" in *Memoir of the Rev. Joseph Stibbs Christmas* by E. Lord (Montreal: John Lovell, 1868). **Note:** The material has been condensed, and liberty has been taken for some light editing.