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The Sinner's Natural Power and Moral Weakness

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Text.--2 Pet. 2:19: "Of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage."

I propose in my present discourse to discuss the moral state of the sinner.

I. All men are naturally free, and none the less so for being sinners.

II. Men have this attribute of moral liberty, it is equally true that they are morally enslaved.

I. The first important fact to be noted is that all men are naturally free, and none the less so for being sinners.

- 1. They naturally have freedom of will. By natural freedom I do not mean that they have a right to do as they please; for this can by no means be true. Nor do I mean that they are free agents merely in the sense of being able to do as they will to do. In fact men sometimes can and sometimes cannot execute their purposes of will; but be this as it may, moral liberty does not consist in the power to accomplish one's purposes. You are aware that some old philosophers defined liberty of will to be the power to do what you will to do. This for many reasons cannot be the true idea of freedom of the will. For look at the department of doing which is embraced in muscular action. The simple fact is that some of our muscles are not under the control of the will at all, while others are under its control by a law of the sternest necessity. In regard to this latter class, all the freedom there is pertains to the will -- none of it to the action of the muscles controlled by the will. It is then a sheer mistake to deny the location of freedom where it is, and to locate it where it is not. If there be any such thing as necessity in the universe, it is found in the absolute control held by the will over those physical muscles which are placed under its control. The obedience of the muscles is absolute -- not free or voluntary in any sense whatever. Hence the absurdity of locating human freedom there.
- 2. This freedom is in the will itself, and consists in its power of free choice. To do, or not to do

-- this is its option. It has by its own nature and function of determining its own volitions. The soul wills to do or not to do, and thus is a moral sovereign over its own activities. In this fact lies the foundation for moral agency. A being so constituted that he can will to do or not to do, and has moreover knowledge and appreciation of his moral obligations, is a moral agent. None other can be.

It deserves special notice here that every man knows that he has a conscience which tells him how he ought to act, as well as a moral power in the exercise of which he can either heed or repel its monitions.

- 3. That a man is free in the sense of determining his own activities is proved by each man's own consciousness. This proof requires no chain of reasoning. A man is just as much aware and as well aware of originating his own acts as he is of acting at all. Does he really act himself? Yes. And does he know that he acts himself? Yes. How does he know these things? By consciousness. But he has the same evidence of being free -- for this is equally proved by his own consciousness.
- 4. Still further -- man can distinguish between those acts in which he is free, and those in which he is acted upon by influences independent of his own choice. He knows that in some things he is a recipient of influences and of actions exerted upon himself, while in other things he is not a recipient in the same sense, but a voluntary actor. The fact of this discrimination proves the possession of free agency.

The difference to which I now refer is one of every day consciousness. Sometimes a man can not tell whence his thoughts come. Impressions are made upon his mind the origin of which he cannot trace. They may be from above -- they may be from beneath: he knows but little of their source, and little about them, save that they are not his own free volitions. Of his own acts of will there can be no such uncertainty. He knows their origin. He knows that they are the product of an original power in himself, for the exercise of which he is compelled to hold himself primarily responsible.

Not only has he this direct consciousness, but he has, as already suggested, the testimony of his own conscience. This faculty, by its very nature, takes cognizance of his moral acts, requiring certain acts of will and forbidding others. This faculty is an essential condition of free moral agency. Possessing it, and also man's other mental powers, he must be free and under moral obligation.

- 5. It is inconceivable that man should be under moral law and government, without the power of free moral action. The logical condition of the existence of a conscience in man is that he should be free.
- 6. That man is free is evident from the fact that he is conscious of praise or blameworthiness. He could not reasonably blame himself unless it were a first truth that he is free. By a first truth, I mean one that is known to all by a necessity of their own nature. There are such truths -- those which none can help knowing, however much they may desire to ignore them. Now unless it were a first truth, necessarily known to all, that man is free, he could not praise or blame

himself.

As conscience implies moral agency, so, where there is a conscience, it is impossible for men really to deny moral responsibility. Men cannot but blame themselves for wrong doing. Conscious of the forewarning of conscience against the wrong act, how can they evade the conviction that the act was wrong?

Again, the Bible always treats men as free agents, commanding them to do or not to do as if of course they had all the power requisite to obey such commands. A young minister once said to me, "I preach that men ought to repent, but never that they can." "Why not preach also that they can?" said I. He replies, "The Bible does not affirm that they can." To this I replied that it would be most consummate trifling for a human legislature, having required certain acts, to proceed to affirm that its subjects have the power to obey. The very requirement is the strongest possible affirmation, that in the belief of the enacting power, the subjects are able to do the things required. If the lawmakers did not believe this, how in reason could they require it? The very first assumption to be made concerning good rulers is, that they have common sense and common honesty. To deny, virtually, that God has these qualities, is blasphemous.

- 7. Freedom of will lies among the earliest and most resistless convictions. Probably no one living can remember his first idea of oughtness -- his first convictions of right and wrong. It is also among our most irresistible convictions. We assume the freedom of our own will from the very first. The little child affirms it in its first infantile efforts to accomplish its purposes. See him reach forth to get his food or his playthings. The little machinery of a freely acting agent begins to play long ere he can understand it. He begins to act on his own responsibility, long before he can estimate what or how great this responsibility is. The fact of personal responsibility is fastened on us so that we might as well escape from ourselves as from this conviction.

II. While it is true, past a rational denial, that men have this attribute of moral liberty, it is equally true that they are morally enslaved -- in moral bondage.

- 1. The liberty they have by created constitution; the bondage comes by voluntary perversion and abuse of their powers.
- 2. The Bible represents men as a being in bondage -- as having the power to resist temptation to sin, but yet as voluntarily yielding to those temptations. Just as our dough-faced politicians might, but do not and will not, resist the demands of the slave power. Just such is the bondage of sinners under temptation. The Bible represents Satan as ruling the hearts of men at his will, just as the men who wield the slave power of the South rule the dough faces of the North at their will, dictating the choice of our Presidents and the entire legislation of the Federal Government. So Satan ruled Eve in the garden; so he now "works in the children of disobedience."
- 3. What the Bible thus represents, experience proves to be true. Wicked men know that they are in bondage to Satan. What do you think puts it into the heart of young men to plot iniquity and

drink it in like water? Is it not the devil? How many young men do we meet with, who, when tempted, seem to have no moral stamina to resist, but are swept away by the first gust of temptation.

- 4. Men are in bondage to their appetites. Appetite excited leads them away as it led Eve and Adam. What can be the reason that some young men find it so hard to give up the use of tobacco? They know the habit is filthy and disgusting; they know it must injure their health; but appetite craves, and the devil helps on its demands; the poor victim makes a feeble effort to deliver himself, but the devil turns the screw again and holds him the tighter, and then drags him back to a harder bondage.

So when a man is in bondage to alcohol, and so with every form of sensual indulgence. Satan helps on the influence of sensuality, and does not care much what the particular form of it may be, provided its power be strong enough to ruin the soul. It all plays into his hand and promotes his main purpose.

So men are in bondage to the love of money; to the fashions of the world; to the opinions of mankind. By these they are enslaved and led on in the face of the demands of duty. Every man is really enslaved who is in fact led counter to his convictions of duty. He is free only when he acts in accordance with those convictions. This is the true idea of liberty. Only when reason and conscience control the will is a man free -- for God made man, intelligent and moral beings to act normally, under the influence of their own enlightened conscience and reason. This is such freedom as God exercises and enjoys; none can be higher or nobler. But when a moral agent is in bondage to his low appetites and passions, and is led by them to disregard the dictates of his conscience and of his reason, he is simply a galley slave, and to a very hard and cruel master.

God made men to be free, giving them just such mental powers as they need in order to control their own activities as a rational being should wish to. Their bondage, then, is altogether voluntary. They choose to resist the control of reason, and submit to the control of appetite and passion.

- 5. Every impenitent man is conscious of being really in bondage to temptation. What man, not saved from sin through grace, does not know that he is an enigma to himself? I should have little respect for any man who should say he was never ashamed of himself, and never found himself doing things he could not well account for. Especially I should be ashamed and afraid too, if I were to hear a student say he had never been impressed with a sense of his moral weakness. Such ignorance would only show his utter lack of reflection, and his consequent failure to notice the most obvious moral phenomena of his inner life. What! does he not know that his weakest desires carry his will, the strongest convictions of his reason and conscience to the contrary notwithstanding?

This is a most guilty state, because so altogether voluntary -- so needless, and so opposed to the convictions of his reason and of his understanding and withal so opposed to his convictions of God's righteous demands. To go counter to such convictions, he must be supremely guilty.

Of course such conduct must be most suicidal. The sinner acts in most decided opposition to his own best interests, so that if he has the power to ruin himself this course must certainly do it. The course he pursues is of all others best adapted to destroy both body and soul; how then can it be anything but suicidal? He practically denies all moral obligation. And yet he knows the fact of his moral obligation, and denies it in the face of his clearest convictions. How can this be otherwise than suicidal? I have many times asked sinners how they could account for their own conduct. The honest ones answer, "I cannot at all -- I am an enigma to myself." The real explanation is, that while by created constitution they are free moral agents; yet, by the infatuation of sin, they have sold themselves into moral bondage, and are really slaves to Satan and their own lusts.

This is a state of deep moral degradation. Intrinsicly it is most disgraceful. Everybody feels this in regard to certain forms of sin and classes of sinners. We all feel that drunkenness is beastly. A drunkard we regard as a long way towards beast hood. See him reeling about, mentally besotted, and reeking in his own filth! Is not he almost a beast? Nay, rather must we not ask pardon of all beasts for this comparison, for not one is so mean and so vile -- not one excites in our bosom such a sense of voluntary degradation. Compared with the self-besotted drunkard, any one of them is a noble creature.

So we all say, looking only from our human standpoint. But there is another and a better standpoint. How do angels look upon this self-made drunkard? They see in him one made only a little lower than themselves, and one who might have aspired to companionship with them; yet he chose rather to sink himself down to a level with swine! O how their souls must recoil from the sight of such self-made degradation! To see the noble quality of intellect discarded; and yet nobler moral qualities disowned, and trodden under foot as if they were only an encumbrance -- this is too much for angels to bear. How they must feel!

Nor is the drunkard alone in the contempt which his sensual degradation entails. See the tobacco-smoker. The correct taste of community demands that by conventional laws he be excluded from parlors, steamboat-cabins, first class rail-cars, churches, and indeed all really decent places. Yet, for the sake of this low indulgence, the smoker is willing to descend into places not decent. See him steal out of his place among respectable people in the rail-car, and herd with rowdies in the smoking car, for the sake of his filthy indulgence. If he were only obliged to ride all day in the society to which he sinks himself by this indulgence, it might admonish him of the cost of his sensuality! It might help to open his eyes!

- 6. I have taken these forms of sensual indulgence as illustrations of the real degradation of sin. In these cases the good sense of mankind has been evinced by the grade of debasement to which they consign these votaries of low self-indulgence. If we only saw things in their right light we should take the same view of the moralist. I recollect that in talking with a great moralist he said, "How can I act from regard to God or to the right? How can I go to meeting from the high motive of pleasing God? I can go from a desire to promote my own selfish ends, but how can I go for the sake of pleasing God?"

Yes, that is precisely his difficulty and his guilt. He does not care how little he pleases God! That is the least of his concern. The very lowest class of motives sways his will and his life. He stands entirely afar from the reach of the highest and noblest. In this consists his self-made degradation and his exceeding great guilt.

So of the miser when he gets beyond all motives but the love of hoarding; when his practical question is; not, how shall I honor my race, or bless my generation, or glorify my Maker; but how can I make a few coppers? Even when urged to pray, he would ask, "What profit shall I have if I do pray unto Him?" When you find a man thus incapable of being moved by noble motives, what a wretch he is! How ineffably mean!

So I might bring before you the ambitious scholar, who is too low in his aims to be influenced by the exalted motive of doing good, and who feels only that which touches his reputation. Is not this exceedingly low and mean? What would you think of the preacher who should lose all regard for the welfare of souls, and think only of fishing for his reputation? What would you say of him? You would declare that he was too mean and too wicked to live, and fit only for hell! What would you think of one who might shine like Lucifer among the morning stars of intellect and genius, but who should debase himself to the low and miserable vocation of snuffing round after applause, and fishing for compliments to his talents? Would you not say that such self-seeking is unutterably contemptible? With all heaven from above beckoning them on to lofty purpose and efforts, there they are, working their "muck-rake," and nosing after some little advantage to their small selves!

See that ambitious man who so longs to please everybody that he conforms his own to everybody's opinions, and never has one that is really his own? Must not he be low enough to satisfy any of those whose ambition seems strangely reversed, so that they only aspire to dive and sink -- never to soar; whose impulses all tend downwards and never up? One would suppose they would have degradation enough to satisfy any ordinary ambition.

All this comes of bondage to base selfishness. Alas, that there should be so much of this in our world that public sentiment rarely estimates it anywise according to its real nature!

REMARKS.

1. Our subject reveals the case of those who are convicted of the right, but cannot be persuaded to do it.

For example, on the subject of temperance, he is convicted as to duty -- knows he ought to reform absolutely, but yet he will not change. Every temperance lecture carries conviction, but the next temptation sweeps it by the board, and he returns like the dog to his vomit. But mark this, -- every successive process of temperance-conviction and temptation's triumph, leaves him weaker than before, and very soon will find him utterly prostrate. Miserable man! How certainly he will die in his sins!

2. No matter what the form of the temptation may be, he who, when convinced of his duty, yet takes no corresponding action, is on the high road to perdition. Inevitably this bondage grows stronger and stronger with every fresh trial of its strength. Every time you are convinced of duty and yet resist that conviction, and refuse to act in accordance with it, you become more and more helpless; you commit yourself more and more to the control of your iron-hearted master. Every fresh care renders you only the more fully a helpless slave.

3. There may be some young men here who have already made themselves a moral wreck. There may be lads not yet sixteen who have already put their conscience effectually beneath their feet. Already you have learned perhaps, to go against all your convictions of duty. How horrible! Every day your bands are growing stronger. With each day's resistance, your soul is more deeply and hopelessly lost. Poor, miserable, dying sinner! "He that, being often reprov'd, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy!" Suddenly, you dash upon the breakers and are gone! Your friends move solemnly along the shore, and look out upon those rocks of damnation on which your soul is wrecked, and weeping as they go, they mournfully say, "There is the wreck of one who knew his duty but did it not. Thousands of times the appeals of conviction came home to his heart -- but he learned to resist them -- he made it his business to resist, and alas, he was only too successful!"

4. How insane the delusion, that the sinner's case, while yet in his sins, is growing better. As well might the drunkard fancy he is growing better because every temperance lecture convicts him of his sin and shame, while yet every next day's temptation leaves him drunk as ever! Growing better! There can be no delusion so false and so fatal as this!

You see the force of this delusion in clearer light when you notice how slight are the considerations that sway the soul against all the vast motives of God's character and kingdom. Must not that be a strong and fearful delusion which can make considerations so slight outweigh motives so vast and momentous?

5. The guilt of this state is to be estimated by the insignificance of the motives which control the mind. What would you think of the youth who could murder his father for a sixpence? What! you would exclaim, for so mean a pittance be bribed to murder his father! You would account his guilt the greater by how much less the temptation.

6. Our subject shows the need of the Holy Spirit to impress the truth on the hearts of sinners.

7. You may also see how certainly sinners will be lost if they grieve the Spirit of God away. Your earthly friends might be discouraged, and yet you might be saved; but if the Spirit of God becomes discouraged and leaves you, your doom is sealed forever. "Woe unto them when I depart from them!" This departure of God from the sinner gives the signal for tolling the knell of his lost soul. Then the mighty angel begins to toll, toll, TOLL! the great bell of eternity; -- one more soul going to its eternal doom!

GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

Compiled by Katie Stewart

1. **Complacency, or Esteem:** "Complacency, as a state of will or heart, is only benevolence modified by the consideration or relation of right character in the object of it. God, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints, in all ages, are as virtuous in their self-denying and untiring labours to save the wicked, as they are in their complacent love to the saints." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE VII)*. Also, "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE XII)*.
2. **Disinterested Benevolence:** "By disinterested benevolence I do not mean, that a person who is disinterested feels no interest in his object of pursuit, but that he seeks the happiness of others for its own sake, and not for the sake of its reaction on himself, in promoting his own happiness. He chooses to do good because he rejoices in the happiness of others, and desires their happiness for its own sake. God is purely and disinterestedly benevolent. He does not make His creatures happy for the sake of thereby promoting His own happiness, but because He loves their happiness and chooses it for its own sake. Not that He does not feel happy in promoting the happiness of His creatures, but that He does not do it for the sake of His own gratification." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE I)*.
3. **Divine Sovereignty:** "The sovereignty of God consists in the independence of his will, in consulting his own intelligence and discretion, in the selection of his end, and the means of accomplishing it. In other words, the sovereignty of God is nothing else than infinite benevolence directed by infinite knowledge." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXVI)*.
4. **Election:** "That all of Adam's race, who are or ever will be saved, were from eternity chosen by God to eternal salvation, through the sanctification of their hearts by faith in Christ. In other words, they are chosen to salvation by means of sanctification. Their salvation is the end- their sanctification is a means. Both the end and the means are elected, appointed, chosen; the means as really as the end, and for the sake of the end." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXIV)*.
5. **Entire Sanctification:** "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and, (2.) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LVIII)*.
6. **Moral Agency:** "Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation. The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
7. **Moral Depravity:** "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.

8. **Human Reason:** "the intuitive faculty or function of the intellect... it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation to act in conformity with perceived moral relations." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
9. **Retributive Justice:** "Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXIV)*.
10. **Total Depravity:** "Moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
11. **Unbelief:** "the soul's withholding confidence from truth and the God of truth. The heart's rejection of evidence, and refusal to be influenced by it. The will in the attitude of opposition to truth perceived, or evidence presented." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LV)*.