

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN'S IMPOTENCE

Chapter 10 OPPOSITION

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Transcript

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OPPOSITION

In bringing this study to a close it seems desirable that we should consider the opposition made against this truth before giving an exposition of it. This subject of the moral inability of fallen man for good is peculiarly repugnant to his pride, and therefore it is not surprising that his outcry against it is so loud and prolonged. The exposure of human depravity, the disclosure of the fearful ruin which sin has wrought in our constitution, cannot be a pleasant thing to contemplate and still less to acknowledge as a fact. To heartily own that by nature I am devoid of love for God, that I am full of inveterate enmity against Him, is diametrically opposed to my whole makeup. It is only natural to form a high estimate of ourselves and to entertain exalted views of both our capabilities and our good intentions. To be assured on divine authority that our hearts are incurably wicked, that we love darkness rather than light, that we hate alike the law and the gospel, is revolting to our whole being. Every possible effort is put forth by the carnal mind to repudiate such a flesh-withering and humiliating description of human nature. If it cannot be refuted by an appeal to facts, then it must be held up to ridicule. MAN'S REFUSAL TO ACCEPT THE DOCTRINE

Such opposition to the truth should neither surprise nor discourage us, for it has been plainly announced to us: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him" (1 Cor. 2:14). The very fact that they are foolishness to him should lead us to expect he will laugh at and scorn them. Nor must we be alarmed when we find this mocking of the truth is far from being confined to avowed infidels and open enemies of God; this same antagonism appears in the great majority of religious persons and those who pose as the champions of Christianity. Passing through a seminary and putting on the ministerial garb does not transform the unregenerate into regenerate men. When our Lord announced, "The truth shall make you free," it was the religious leaders of the Jews who declared they were never in bondage; and when He affirmed, "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do," they replied, "Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil?" (John 8). PRINCIPAL OBJECTIONS

It is just because the fiercest opposition to this truth comes from those inside Christendom, not from those outside, that we consider it wise to face the principal objections. We do so to place the Lord's people on their guard and to let them see there is no weight in such criticism. We would not waste time in seeking to close the mouths of those whom God Himself will deal with in due time, but we desire to expose their sophistries so that those with spiritual discernment may perceive that their faith rests on a foundation which no outbursts of unbelief can shake. Every objection against the doctrine of man's spiritual impotence has been overthrown by God's servants in the past, yet each fresh generation repeats the arrogance of its forebears. We have already refuted most of these objections in the course of this study, yet by now assembling them together and showing their pointlessness we may render a service which will not be entirely useless. 1. If fallen man is unable to keep God's law, he cannot be obligated to keep it. Impotence obviously cancels responsibility. A child three or four years of age ought not to be whipped because it does not read and write. A legless man should not be sent to prison because he does not walk. Surely a just and holy God does not require sinful creatures to render perfect obedience to a divine and spiritual law. How is this objection to be met? First, by pointing out that it is not based upon Holy Writ but is merely human reasoning. Scripture affirms again and again that fallen man is spiritually impotent, "without strength," and that he "cannot please God"; from that nothing must move us. Scripture nowhere states that spiritual helplessness releases man from God's claims upon him; therefore no human reasoning to the contrary, however plausible or pleasing, is entitled to any consideration from those who tremble at God's Word. Scripture reveals that God does hold fallen man responsible to keep His law, for He gave it to Israel at Sinai and pronounced His curse upon all transgressors of it. What has been pointed out should be sufficient for any simple soul who fears the Lord. But lest it be thought that this is all which can be said by way of refutation, lest it be supposed that this objection is so forceful that it cannot be met in a more direct rebuttal, we add the following: To declare that man cannot be obligated to keep the law if he is unable to do so demands an inquiry into both the nature and the cause of his inability. Once that investigation is entered into, the sophistry of the objection will quickly appear. Wherein lies man's inability to keep God's law? Is it the absence of the requisite faculties or his unwillingness to use aright the faculties with which he is endowed? Were fallen man devoid of reason, conscience, will, there would be some force in this objection; but since he is possessed of all those faculties which constitute a moral being, it is quite inane and invalid. There is no analogy whatever between the sinner's inability to travel the highway of holiness and the inability of a legless man to walk. The worthlessness of this objection is made evident not only when we examine the nature of man's spiritual impotence; it equally appears void when we diagnose its cause. Why is fallen man unable to keep God's law? Is it because he is worked upon by some almighty being who prevents him from rendering obedience? Were fallen man truly desirous of serving and pleasing God, were it a case of his ardently longing to do so but being thwarted because another more powerful than himself hindered him, there would be some force to this objection. But God, far from placing any obstacle in our way, sets before us every conceivable inducement to comply with His precepts. If it be argued that the devil is more powerful than man and that he is continually seeking to turn him from the path of rectitude, the answer is that Satan can do nothing without our own consent. All he can do is to tempt to wrongdoing; it is man's own will which either yields or refuses. In reply to what has last been pointed out, someone may say, "But fallen man has no sufficient power of his own with which to successfully resist Satan's evil solicitations." Suppose that be so, then what? Does that oblige us to take sides with the enemies of the truth and affirm that therefore man is to be excused for his sinful deeds, that he is not obligated to render perfect obedience to the law merely because he does not have the power to cope with his adversary? Not at all. Once more we must inquire as to the cause. Why is it that man cannot put the devil to flight? Is it because he was originally vested with less moral strength than his foe

possesses? No indeed, for he was made in the image and likeness of God. Man's present inability has been brought about by an act of his own and not by any stinginess or oversight of his Creator. "Thou hast destroyed thyself" (Hosea 13:9) is the divine verdict. Though man is unable to recover what he lost, he has none but himself to blame for his willful and wicked destruction of his original strength. It is at this very point man twists and wriggles most, seeking to get from under the onus which righteously rests on him. When Adam offended against the divine law he sought to throw the blame upon his wife, and she in turn upon the devil; ever since then the great majority have attempted to cast it on God Himself, on the pretext that He is the One who gave them being and sent them into the world in their present handicapped condition. It must be kept steadily in mind that original ability destroyed by self-determination does not and cannot destroy the original obligation any more than weakened moral strength by self-indulgence and the formation of evil habits destroys or diminishes obligation. To say otherwise would be to declare that the result of sin excuses sin itself, which is a manifest absurdity. Man's wrongdoing certainly does not annul God's rights. God is no Egyptian taskmaster .requiring men to make bricks without straw. He endowed man with everything requisite for the discharge of his duty, and though man has squandered his substance in riotous living, that does not free him from God's just claims upon him. The drunkard is certainly less able to obey the law of temperance than the sober man is, yet that law has precisely the same claims upon the former as it has upon the latter. In commercial life the loss of ability to pay does not release from obligation; the loss of property does not free man from his indebtedness. A man is as much a debtor to his creditors after his bankruptcy as he was previously. It is a legal maxim that bankruptcy does not invalidate contracts. Someone may point out that an insolvent debtor cannot be sued in the courts. Nevertheless, even if human law declares it equitable to free an insolvent debtor, the law of God does not. And that verdict is righteous, for the sinner's inability to give God His due is voluntary—he does not wish to pay because he hates Him. Thus both the nature and the cause of man's inability demonstrate that he is "without excuse." 2. When inquiry is made as to the cause of man's spiritual impotence and when it has been shown that this lies not in the Creator but in man's own original rebellion, the objector, far from being silenced, will demur against his being penalized for what his first parents did. He may ask, "Is it just that I should be sent into this world in a state of spiritual helplessness because of their offense? I did not make myself; if I was created with a corrupt nature, why should I be held to blame for its inevitable fruits?" First, let it be pointed out that it is not essential in order for a fallen creature to be blamable for his evil dispositions and acts that he must first be inherently holy. A person who is depraved, who from his heart hates God and despises His law, is nonetheless a sinner because he has been depraved from his birth. His having sinned from the beginning and throughout his existence is surely no valid excuse for his sinning now. Nor is his guilt any the less because his depravity is so deeply rooted in his nature. The stronger his enmity against God the greater its heinousness. But how can man be condemned for his evil heart when Adam corrupted human nature? Fallen man is voluntarily an enemy to the infinitely glorious God and nothing can extenuate such vile hostility. The very fact that in the day of judgment "every mouth will be stopped" (Rom. 3:19) demonstrates there can be no force in this objection. It is the free and self-determined acting out of his nature for which the sinner will be held accountable. The fact that we are born traitors to God cannot cancel our obligation to give Him allegiance. None can escape the righteous requirements of the law by deliberate opposition to it. That man's nature is the direct consequence of Adam's transgression does not to the slightest degree mitigate his own sins. Is it not a solemn fact that each of us has approved Adam's transgression by following his example and joining with him in rebellion against God? That we go on to break the divine law demonstrates that we are justly condemned with Adam. If we resent our being corrupted through Adam, why not repudiate him and refuse to sin, stand out in opposition to him and be holy? Yet still the carnal mind will ask, "Since I lost all power to love and serve

God even before I was born, how can I be held accountable to do what I cannot? Wherein is the justice in requiring from me what it is impossible to render?" Exactly what was it that man lost by the fall? It was a heart that loved God. And it is the possessing of a heart which has no love for God that is the very essence of human depravity. It is this in which the vileness of fallen man consists: no heart for God. But does a loveless heart for God excuse fallen man? No indeed, for that is the very core of his wickedness and guilt. Men never complain of their lack of power for loving the world. And why are they so thoroughly in love with the world? Is it because the world is more excellent and glorious than God is? Certainly not. It is only because fallen man has a heart which naturally loves the world, but he has no heart with which to love God. The world suits and delights him, but God does not; rather, His very perfections repel him. Now let us put it plainly and honestly: Can our being devoid of any true love for God free us from our obligation to love Him? Can it to the slightest degree lessen our blame for not loving Him? Is He not infinitely worthy of our affections, our homage, our allegiance? None would argue in any other connection as does the objector here. If a king rules wisely and well, is he not entitled to the honor and loyalty of his subjects? If an employer is merciful and considerate, has he not the right to expect his employees to further his interests and carry out his orders? If I am a kind and dutiful parent, shall I not require the esteem and obedience of my children? If my servant or child has no heart to give what is due, shall I not justly consider him blamable and deserving of punishment? Or shall we reason so insanely that the worse man grows the less he is to blame? "A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? And if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 1:6). 3. It is objected that if the sinner is so enslaved by sin that he is impotent to do good, his free agency is denied and he is reduced to a mere machine. This is more a metaphysical question than a practical one, being largely a matter of terms. There is a real sense in which the natural man is in bondage; nevertheless within certain limits he is a free agent, for he acts according to his own inclinations without compulsion. There is much confusion on this subject. Freedom of will is not freedom from action; inaction of the will is no more possible than is inaction of the understanding. Nor is freedom of will a freedom from the internal consequences of voluntary action; the formation of a habit is voluntary, but when formed it cannot be eradicated by volition. Nor is freedom of will a freedom from the restraint and regulation of law; the glorified saints will be completely delivered from sin yet regulated by the divine will. Nor is freedom of will a freedom from bias; Christ acted freely, yet being the holy One He could not sin. The unregenerate act freely, that is, spontaneously, agreeably to their desires; yet being depraved, they can neither will nor do anything which is spiritual. 4. If man is spiritually impotent, all exhortations to the performance of spiritual duties are needless and useless. This objection assumes that God would not address His commands to men unless they were able to obey them. This idea is most presumptuous, for in it man pretends to be capable of judging the reasons which regulate the divine procedure. Has God no right to press His claims because man has wickedly squandered his power to meet them? The divine commands cover not what we can do, but what we should do; not what we are able to do, but what we ought to do. The divine law is set before us, in all the length and breadth of its holy requirements, as a means of knowledge, revealing to us God's character, the relation in which we stand to Him, and the duty which He justly requires of us. It is also a means of conviction, both of our sin and inability. If men are sinners it is important that they should be made aware of the fact—by setting before them a perfect standard that they may see how far short they come of it. If men are unable to discharge the duties incumbent upon them, it is necessary that they should be made aware of their woeful condition—that they should be made to realize their need of salvation. 5. To teach men they are spiritually impotent is to cut the nerve of all religious endeavor. If man is helpless, what is the use of urging him to strive? Necessity is a sufficient reason to act without further encouragement. A man in the water who is ready to drown will try to save his life, even though he cannot

swim and some on the banks tell him it is impossible. Again we would press the divine side. There is a necessity on us whenever there is a command from God. If He requires, it behooves man to use the means and leave the issue with Him. Again, spiritual inability is no excuse for negligence and inertia, because God does not refuse strength to perform His bidding if it is humbly, contritely and trustfully sought. When did He ever deny grace to the sinner who waited upon Him in earnest supplication and in consistent use of the means for procuring it? Is not His Word full of promises to seeking souls? If a man has hands and food is set before him, is it not an idle excuse for him to say he cannot eat because he is not moved from above? 6. If the sinner is spiritually powerless, it is only mocking him to tell him to repent of his sins and believe the gospel. To call on the unregenerate to savingly receive Christ as his Lord and Saviour is far from mocking him. Did the Son of God mock the rich young ruler when He told him to sell all that he had and follow Him and then he should have treasure in heaven? Certainly not. Had the ruler no power to sell his possessions? Was it not rather lack of inclination, and for such lack was he not justly blamable? Such a demand served to expose the state of his heart. He loved money more than Christ, earthly things above heavenly. The exhortations, warnings and promises set down in the Word are to be pressed on the ungodly so as to make them more inexcusable, so that they may not say in the day to come that, had they been invited to receive such good things, they would have embraced them; that, had they been admonished for their sins, they would have forsaken them. Their own conscience will convict them, and they will know a prophet of God spoke to them. 7. Finally, it is objected that the doctrine of man's spiritual impotence stifles all hope. To tell a man his condition is irremediable, that he can do nothing whatever to better himself, will drive him to despair. This is precisely what is desired. One principal end which must be kept before the preacher is to shatter the self-sufficiency of his hearer. His business is to undermine the spirit of self-righteousness, to break down self-satisfaction, to sweep away those refuges of lies in which men shelter, to convince them of the utter futility of seeking to win heaven by their own endeavors. His business is to bring before them the exalted claims of God's law and to show how far short we come of it, to expose the wickedness of the human heart, to reveal the ruin which sin has wrought, to bring the sinner face to face with the thrice holy God and to make him realize he is utterly unfit to stand before Him. In a word, the business of God's servant is to make his hearer conscious that unless a miracle of grace is performed in him he is lost forever. Not until the sinner feels that he is helpless and hopeless in himself is he prepared to look outside of himself. Despair opens the door of hope! "Thou hast destroyed thyself, but in me is thine help" (Hosea 13:9).

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