

Prof. Finney's Letters.--No. 36.

by Charles Finney

Moral character is always wholly right or wholly wrong, and never partly right and partly wrong at the same time.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:23, Matthew 6:24, Matthew 22:37-39, Romans 12:1-2, Galatians 5:17, Philippians 2:13, Colossians 3:23-24, James 2:10, 1 Peter 1:15-16, 1 John 3:9

Topics: "Moral Character", "Holiness vs. Sin"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that moral character is either wholly right or wholly wrong, arguing that it cannot be a mixture of both. He explains that true holiness is defined by the ultimate intention of the mind to promote the glory of God and the good of others, while sin is the choice of self-gratification over these higher goods. Finney critiques various philosophical suppositions that suggest the coexistence of holiness and sin, asserting that such a notion is fundamentally flawed. He concludes that moral character is determined solely by one's ultimate intention, which must align with God's law to be considered virtuous. The letter serves as a call to recognize the simplicity of moral action and the necessity of complete devotion to God.

Transcript

DEAR BROTHER:

I come now to show:

V. THAT MORAL CHARACTER IS ALWAYS WHOLLY RIGHT OR WHOLLY WRONG, AND NEVER PARTLY RIGHT AND PARTLY WRONG AT THE SAME TIME.

In the commencement of this letter, I must again remind your readers of that in which moral character consist, and occupy a few moments in stating, what I have already said, that moral character belongs solely to the ultimate intention of the mind, or to choice, as distinguished from volition. The law of God requires supreme disinterested benevolence, and all holiness, in the last analysis, resolves itself into some modification of supreme disinterested benevolence, or good-willing. Benevolence, or good-willing, is synonymous with good-intending, or intending good. Now the true spirit of the requirement of the moral law is this--that every moral being shall choose, will, or intend to promote every interest according to its relative value as perceived by the mind. This is holiness. It is exercising supreme love or good will to God, and equal love or good will to our neighbor.

This is a choice or intention, as distinguished from a volition. It is also an ultimate intention, as distinguished from a proximate intention.

Choice is the selection of an end. Volition is produced by choice, and is the effort of the will to accomplish the end chosen. An ultimate intention, or choice, is that which is intended or chosen for its own sake, or as an ultimate end, and not something chosen or intended as a means to accomplish some other and higher end. A proximate end is that which is chosen or intended, not as an ultimate end, but as a means to an ultimate end. If I choose an end, I, of course, put forth those volitions which are requisite to the accomplishment of that end. Holiness, or virtue, consists in the supreme ultimate intention, choice, or willing the glory of God and the highest good of his kingdom. Nothing else than this is virtue or holiness.

As holiness consists in ultimate intention, so does sin. And as holiness consists in choosing the glory of God and the good of the universe, for its own sake, or as the supreme ultimate end of pursuit; so sin consists in willing, with a supreme choice or intention, self-gratification or self-interest. Preferring a less to a greater good, because it is our own, is selfishness. All selfishness consists in a supreme ultimate intention. By an ultimate intention, as I have said, is intended that which is chosen for its own sake as an end, and not as a means to some other end. Whenever a moral being prefers or chooses his own gratification, or his own interest, in preference to a higher good, he chooses it as an end, for its own sake, and as an ultimate end; not designing it as a means of promoting any other and higher end. Every sin, then, consists in an act of will. It consists in preferring self-gratification, or self-interest, to the authority of God, the glory of God, and the good of the universe. It is, therefore, and must be, a supreme ultimate choice, or intention.

Sin and holiness, then, both consist in supreme, ultimate, and opposite choices, or intentions, and cannot, by any possibility, co-exist.

But for the sake of entering more at large into the discussion of this question, I will--

1. Examine a little in detail the philosophy of the question, and--
2. Bring the philosophy into the light of the Bible.

And in discussing the philosophy of the question, I would observe, that five suppositions may be made, and, so far as I can see, only five, in respect to this subject.

1. It may be supposed, that selfishness and benevolence can co-exist in the same mind.
2. It may be supposed, that the same act or choice may have a complex character, on account of complexity in the motives which induce it.
3. It may be supposed, that an act of choice may be right, or holy in kind, but deficient in intensity, or degree. Or,
4. That the will, or heart, may be right, while the affections, or emotions, are wrong. Or,
5. That there may be a ruling, latent, actually existing, holy preference, or intention, co-existing with opposing volitions.

Now unless one of these suppositions is true, it must follow, that moral character is either wholly right or wholly wrong, and never partly right and partly wrong at the same time.

And now to the examination:

1. It has been shown, that selfishness and benevolence are supreme, ultimate, and opposite choices, or intentions. They cannot, therefore, by any possibility, co-exist in the same mind.

2. The next supposition is, that the same act or choice may have a complex character, on account of complexity in the motives. On this let me say:

(1.) Motives are objective or subjective. An objective motive is that thing external to the mind that induces choice or intention. Subjective motive is the intention itself.

(2.) Character, therefore, does not belong to the objective motive, or to that thing which the mind chooses; but moral character is confined to the subjective motive, which is synonymous with choice or intention. Thus we say, a man is to be judged by his motives, meaning that his character is as his intention is. There may be complexity in the objective motive, but can by no possibility be such complexity in the subjective motive, to which character belongs, as to include both sin and holiness. Multitudes of considerations, external to the mind itself, may have concurred, directly or indirectly in their influence, to induce choice or intention; but the intention or subjective motive is always necessarily simple, and indivisible. In other words, moral character consists in the choice of an ultimate end, and this end is to be chosen for its own sake, else it is not an ultimate end. If this choice be the glory of God and the good of the universe--if it be the willing or intending to promote and treat every interest in the universe according to its perceived relative value, it is a right, a holy motive, or intention. If it be any thing else it is sinful. Now whatever complexity there may have been in the considerations that led the way to this choice or intention, it is self-evident that the intention must be one, simple, and indivisible.

(3.) Whatever complexity there might have been in those considerations that prepared the way to the settling down upon this intention, the mind in a virtuous choice has and can have but one reason for its choice, and that is the intrinsic value of the thing chosen. The glory of God, the good of the universe, and every good according to its perceived relative value, must be chosen for one, and only one reason, and that is, the intrinsic value of the good that is chosen for its own sake. If chosen for any other reason, the choice is not virtuous. It is absurd to say, that a thing is good and valuable in itself, but may be chosen, not for that but for some other reason--that God's glory and happiness, and the happiness of the universe, are an infinite good in themselves, but are not to be chosen for that reason, and on their own account, but for some other reason. Holiness, then, must always consist in singleness of eye or intention. It must consist in the supreme disinterested choice, willing, or intending the glory of God and the good of the universe, for its own sake. In this intention there cannot be any complexity. If there were, it would not be holy, but sinful. It is, therefore, stark nonsense, to say, that one and the same choice may have a complex character, on account of complexity of motive. For that motive in which moral character consists, is the supreme, ultimate intention, or choice. This choice, or intention must consist in the choice of a thing as an end and for its own sake. The supposition, then, that the same choice or intention may have a complex character, on account of complexity in the motives, is wholly inadmissible.

If it be still urged, that the intention or subjective motive may be complex--that several things may be included in the intention and aimed at by the mind--and that it may, therefore, be partly holy and partly sinful--I reply:

(4.) If by this it be meant, that several things may be aimed at or intended by the mind, at the same time, I inquire what things? It is true, that the supreme, disinterested intention to glorify God may include the

intention to use all the necessary means. It may also include the intention to promote every interest in the universe, according to its perceived relative value. These are all properly included in one intention; but this implies no such complexity in the subjective motive as to include both sin and holiness.

(5.) If by complexity of intention is meant that it may be partly disinterestedly benevolent and partly selfish, which it must be to be partly holy and partly sinful, I reply, that this supposition is absurd. It has been shown, that selfishness and benevolence consist in supreme ultimate and opposite choices or intentions. To suppose, then, that an intention can be both holy and sinful, is to suppose that it may include two supreme opposite and ultimate choices or intentions at the same time. In other words, that I may supremely and disinterestedly intend to regard and promote every interest in the universe according to its perceived relative value, for its own sake; and at the same time, may supremely regard my own self-interest and self-gratification, and in some things supremely intend to promote my selfish interests, in opposition to the interests of the universe and the commands of God. But this is naturally impossible. An ultimate intention, then, may be complex in the sense, that it may include the design to promote every perceived interest, according to its relative value; but it cannot, by any possibility, be complex in the sense, that it includes selfishness and benevolence, or holiness and sin.

3. The third supposition is, that holiness may be right, or pure in kind, but deficient in degree. On this I remark:

(1.) We have seen, that moral character consists in the ultimate intention.

(2.) The supposition, therefore, must be, that the intention may be right, or pure in kind, but deficient in the degree of its strength.

(3.) Our intention is to be tried by the law of God, both in respect to its kind and degree.

(4.) The law of God requires us to will, or intend the promotion of every interest in the universe according to its perceived relative value, for its own sake. In other words, that all our powers shall be supremely and disinterestedly devoted to the glory of God and the good of the universe.

(5.) This cannot mean, that any faculty shall at every moment be kept upon the strain, or in a state of intense tension, for this would be inconsistent with natural ability. It would be to require a natural impossibility, and therefore unjust.

(6.) It cannot mean, that at all times and on all subjects, the same degree of exertion shall be made, for the best possible discharge of duty does not always require the same intense degree of intense mental or corporeal exertion.

(7.) The law cannot, justly or possibly, require more, than that the whole being shall be consecrated to God--that we shall fully will or intend the promotion of every interest according to its perceived relative value, according to the extent of our ability.

(8.) Now the strength, or intensity of the intention must, and ought, of necessity, to depend upon the degree of our knowledge or light in regard to any object of choice. If an obligation is not to be graduated by the light we possess, then it would follow that we may be under obligation to exceed our natural ability, which cannot be.

(9.) The importance which we attach to objects of choice, and consequently the degree of ardor or intenseness of the intention, must depend upon the clearness or obscurity of our view, of the real or relative value of the objects of choice.

(10.) Our obligation cannot be measured by the views which God has of the importance of those objects of choice. It is a well settled and generally admitted truth, that increased light increases responsibility, or moral obligation. No creature is bound to will any thing with the intenseness or degree of strength with which God wills it; for the plain reason, that no creature sees its importance, or real value, as He does. If our obligation were to be graduated by God's knowledge of the real or relative value of objects, we could never be entirely sanctified, either in this world or the world to come, nor could any being but God be in a state of entire sanctification.

(11.) Nor can our obligation be measured by the views or knowledge which angels may have of the intrinsic or relative value of the glory of God, the worth of souls, and the good of the universe.

(12.) Nor can the obligation of a heathen be measured by the knowledge and light of a Christian.

(13.) Nor the obligation of a child, by the knowledge of a man.

(14.) The fact is, that the obligation of every moral being must be graduated by his knowledge.

(15.) If, therefore, his intention be equal in its intensity to his views, or knowledge of the real or relative value of different objects, it is right. It is up to the full measure of his obligation; and if his own honest judgment is not to be made the measure of his obligation, then his obligation can exceed what he is able to know; which contradicts the doctrine of natural ability, and is, therefore, false.

(16.) If conscious honesty of intention, both as it respects the kind and degree of intention, according to the degree of light possessed, be not entire sanctification, then there is no being, in heaven or earth, who can know himself to be entirely sanctified; for all that any being can possibly know upon this subject is, that he honestly wills or intends, in accordance with the dictates of his reason, or the judgment which he has of the real or relative value of the object chosen.

(17.) If something more than this can be required, then a law can be binding farther than it is prescribed, or so published that it may be known, which is contradictory to natural justice, and absurd.

(18.) No moral being can possibly blame, or charge himself with any default, when he is conscious of honestly intending, willing, or choosing, and acting, according to the best light he has.

(19.) Nothing less than this uprightness of intention, both in kind and degree, is virtue or obedience at all.

(20.) Good-willing or intending is, in respect to God, to be at all times supreme, and in respect to other beings it is to be in proportion to the relative value of their happiness as perceived by the mind. This is always to be the intention. The volitions, or efforts of the will to promote these objects, may and ought to vary indefinitely in their intensity, in proportion to the particular duty to which, for the time being, we are called.

(21.) But farther, we have seen that virtue consists in willing every good according to its perceived relative value, and that nothing short of this is virtue. But this is perfect virtue for the time being. In other words, virtue and moral perfection, in respect to a given act, or state of the will, are synonymous terms. Virtue is

holiness. Holiness is uprightness. Uprightness is that which is just right, just that which, under the circumstances, it should be; and nothing else is virtue, holiness, or uprightness. Virtue, holiness, uprightness, justice, moral perfection--when we apply these terms to any given state of the will, are synonymous. To talk, therefore, of a virtue, holiness, uprightness, justice,--right in kind, but deficient in degree--is to talk sheer nonsense. It is the same absurdity as to talk of sinful holiness, an unjust justice, a wrong rightness, an impure purity, an imperfect perfection, a disobedient obedience.

(22.) The fact is, virtue, holiness, uprightness, &c., signify a definite thing, and never any thing else than conformity to the law of God. That which is not entirely conformed to the law of God is not holiness. This must be true in philosophy, and the Bible affirms the same thing. "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all."

(23.) God has no right to call that holy, which is defective in degree.

(24.) Unless every perceived interest is, for the time being, willed or intended according to its relative value, there is no virtue. Where this intention exists there can be no sin.

4. The next supposition is, that the will, or heart, may be right, while the affections or emotions are wrong. Upon this I remark:

(1.) This supposition overlooks that in which moral character consists. It has been shown, that moral character consists in the supreme ultimate intention of the mind, and that this supreme, disinterested benevolence, good-willing, or intention, is the whole of virtue. Now this intention begets volitions. It directs the attention of the mind, and, therefore, produces thoughts, emotions, or affections. It also, through volition, begets bodily action. But moral character does not lie in outward actions, the movement of the arm, nor in the volition that moves the muscles; for that volition terminates upon the action itself. I will to move my arm. Moral character belong solely to the intention, that produced the volition, that moved the muscles, to the performance of the outward act. So intention produces the volition that directs the attention of the mind to a given object. Attention, by a natural necessity, produces thought, affection, or emotion. Now thought, affection, or emotion, are all connected with volition by a natural necessity; that is--if the attention is directed to an object, corresponding thoughts and emotions must exist of course. Moral character no more lies in emotion, than in outward action. It does not lie in thought, or attention. It does not lie in the specific volition that directed the attention; but in that intention. or design of the mind, that produced the volition, which directed the attention, which again produced the thought, which again produced the emotion. Now the supposition, that the intention may be right, while the emotions or feelings of the mind may be wrong, is the same as to say, that outward action may be wrong, while the intention is right. The fact is, that moral character is and must be as the ultimate intention is. If any feeling or outward action is inconsistent with the existing ultimate intention, it must be so in spite of the agent. But if any outward action or state of feeling exists, in opposition to the intention or choice of the mind, it cannot, by any possibility, have moral character. Whatever is beyond the control of a moral agent, he cannot be responsible for. Whatever he cannot control by intention, he cannot control at all. Every thing for which he can possibly be responsible, resolves itself into his intention. His whole character, therefore, is and must be as his intention is. If, therefore, temptations, from whatever quarter they may come, produce emotions within him inconsistent with his intention, and which he cannot control, he cannot be responsible for them.

(2.) As a matter of fact, although emotions, contrary to his intentions, may, by circumstances beyond his control, be brought to exist in his mind; yet, by willing to direct the attention of the mind from the objects

that produce them, they can be banished from the mind. If this is done as soon as in the nature of the case it can be, there is no sin. If it is not done as soon as in the nature of the case it can be, then it is absolutely certain, that the intention is not what it ought to be. The intention is to devote the whole being to the service of God and the good of the universe, and of course to avoid every thought, affection and emotion, inconsistent with this. While this intention exists, it is certain that if any object be thrust upon the attention which excites thoughts and emotions inconsistent with our supreme ultimate intention, the attention of the mind will be instantly diverted from those objects, and the hated emotion hushed. For, while the intention exists, corresponding volitions must exist. There cannot, therefore, be a right state of heart or intention, while the emotions or affections of the mind are sinful. And, as I said, the supposition overlooks that in which moral character consists, and supposes it to consist in that over which the law does not properly legislate; for love, or benevolence is the fulfilling of the law.

But here it may be said, that the law not only requires benevolence, or good-willing, but requires a certain kind of emotions, just as it requires the performance of certain outward actions, and that therefore there may be right intention where there is a deficiency, either in kind or degree, of right emotions. To this I answer:

Outward actions are required of men, only because they are connected with intention, by a natural necessity. And no outward act is ever required of us, unless it can be produced by intending and aiming to do it. If the effect does not follow our honest endeavors, because of any antagonist influence, opposed to our exertions, which we cannot overcome, we have by our intention complied with the spirit of the law, and are not to blame that the outward effect does not take place. Just so with emotions. All we have power to do, is, to direct the attention of the mind to those objects calculated to secure a given state of emotion. If, from any exhaustion of the sensibility, or for any other cause beyond our control, the emotions do not arise which the consideration of that subject is calculated to produce, we are no more responsible for the absence or weakness of the emotion, than we should be for the want or weakness of motion in our muscles, when we willed to move them, in consequence of exhaustion or any other preventing cause, over which we had no control. The fact is, we cannot be blame-worthy for not feeling or doing that which we cannot do or feel by intending it. If the intention then is what it ought to be for the time being, nothing can be morally wrong.

5. The last supposition is, that a latent preference, or right intention, may co-exist with opposing or sinful volitions. Upon this I remark:

That I have formerly supposed, that this could be true, but am now convinced, that it cannot be true; for the following reasons.

(1.) Observe, that the supposition is, that the intention, or ruling preference may be right--may really exist as an active and virtuous state of mind, while, at the same time, volitions may exist inconsistent with it.

(2.) Now what is a right intention? I answer: Nothing short of this--willing, choosing, or intending the glory of God and the good of the universe, and to promote this at every moment, to the extent of our ability. In other words--right intention is supreme, disinterested benevolence. Now what are the elements which enter into this right intention?

a. The choice or willing of every interest, according to its perceived relative value.

b. To devote our entire being, now and for ever, to this end. This is right intention. Now the question is, can this intention co-exist with a volition inconsistent with it? Volition implies the choice of something, for some reason. If it be the choice of whatever can promote this supremely benevolent end, and for that reason, the volition is consistent with the intention; but if it be the choice of something perceived to be inconsistent with this end, and for a selfish reason, then the volition is inconsistent with the supposed intention. But the question is, do the volition and the intention co-exist? According to the supposition, the will chooses, or wills something, for a selfish reason, or something perceived to be inconsistent with supreme, disinterested benevolence. Now it is plainly impossible, that this choice can take place while the opposite intention exists. For this selfish volition is, according to the supposition, sinful or selfish; that is--something is chosen for its own sake, which is inconsistent with disinterested benevolence. But here the intention is ultimate. It terminates upon the object chosen for its own sake. To suppose, then, that benevolence still remains in exercise, and that a volition co-exists with it that is sinful, involves the absurdity of supposing, that selfishness and benevolence can co-exist in the same mind, or that the will can choose, or will, with a supreme preference, or choice, two opposites, at the same time. This is plainly impossible. Suppose I intend to go to the city of New-York as soon as I possibly can. Now if, on my way, I will to loiter unnecessarily a moment, I necessarily relinquish one indispensable element of my intention. In willing to loiter, or turn aside to some other object, for a day, or an hour, I must, of necessity, relinquish the intention of going as soon as I possibly can. I may not design to finally relinquish my journey, but I must of necessity relinquish the intention of going as soon as I can. Now virtue consists in intending to do all the good I possibly can, or in willing the glory of God and the good of the universe, and intending to promote them to the extent of my ability. Nothing short of this is virtue. Now if, at any time, I will something perceived to be inconsistent with this intention, I must, for the time being, relinquish the intention, as it must indispensably exist in my mind in order to be virtue. I may not come to the resolution, that I will never serve God any more, but I must of necessity relinquish, for the time being, the intention of doing my utmost to glorify God, if at any time I put forth a selfish volition. Therefore, a holy intention cannot co-exist with a selfish volition.

It must be, therefore, that in every sinful choice, the will of a holy being must necessarily drop the exercise of supreme, benevolent intention, and pass into an opposite state of choice; that is--the agent must cease, for the time being, to exercise benevolence, and make a selfish choice.

Having briefly examined the several supposition that can be made in regard to the mixed character of actions, I will now answer a few objections; after which I will bring this philosophy as briefly as possible, into the light of the Bible.

Objection. Does a Christian cease to be a Christian, whenever he commits a sin? I answer:

1. Whenever he sins, he must, for the time being, cease to be holy. This is self-evident.
2. Whenever he sins, he must be condemned. He must incur the penalty of the law of God. If he does not, it must be because the law of God is abrogated. But if the law of God be abrogated, he has no rule of duty; consequently, can neither be holy nor sinful. If it be said that the precept is still binding upon him, but that with respect to the Christian the penalty is for ever set aside, or abrogated, I reply--that to abrogate the penalty is to repeal the precept; for a precept without penalty is no law. It is only counsel or advice. The Christian, therefore, is justified no farther than he obeys, and must be condemned when he disobeys, or Antinomianism is true.
3. When the Christian sins, he must repent, and 'do his first works,' or he will perish.

4. Until he repents he cannot be forgiven. In these respects, then, the sinning Christian and the unconverted sinner are upon precisely the same ground.

5. In two important respects the sinning Christian differs widely from the unconverted sinner:

(1.) In his relations to God. A Christian is a child of God. A sinning Christian is a disobedient child of God. An unconverted sinner is a child of the devil. A Christian sustains a covenant relation to God. Such a covenant relation as to secure to him that discipline which will reclaim and bring him back, if he wanders away from God. "If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, or suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips." Ps. 89:30-34.

(2.) The sinning Christian differs from the unconverted man, in the state of his sensibility. In whatever way it takes place, every Christian knows that the state of his sensibility in respect to the things of God, has undergone a great change. Now it is true, that moral character does not lie in the sensibility. Nevertheless our consciousness teaches us, that our feelings have great power in inducing acts of choice. In every Christian's heart there is, therefore, a foundation laid for appeals to the sensibilities of the soul, that gives truth a decided advantage over the will. And multitudes of things in the experience of every Christian, give truth a more decided advantage over his will than in the case with unconverted sinners.

Obj. Can a man be born again, and then be unborn? I answer:

1. If there were any thing impossible in this, then perseverance would be no virtue.

2. None will maintain, that there is any thing naturally impossible in this, except it be those who hold to physical regeneration.

3. If regeneration consist in a change in the ruling preference of the mind, it is plain, that an individual can be born again and afterwards cease to be virtuous.

4. That a Christian is able to apostatize, is evident, from the many warnings addressed to Christians in the Bible.

5. Regeneration designates the first holy act, whether it be love, repentance, or faith. Now it is plain, that there can be but one first holy act, and therefore can be but one regeneration.

6. But a Christian may be converted sundry times. Christ said to Peter, doubtless after he had been converted--"When thou art converted strengthen thy brethren."

7. A Christian may certainly fall into sin and unbelief, and afterwards be renewed, both to repentance and faith.

Obj. But how is this theory consistent with 1 John 3:9: "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God"? I answer:

1. What does this passage mean? Should we understand it strictly, we should be obliged to admit that no Christian can, by any possibility, commit a sin. But this would contradict multitudes of other passages of the Bible. What is the "seed" here spoken of, that "remaineth in him"? Does it imply a physical change--some root or seed implanted in the very constitution? Then, to be sure, sin would be naturally

impossible. This, then, is not the meaning. Is this "seed" the love of God? But in what sense does this always remain in a man? Not constantly, as an exercise or voluntary state of mind. For this, as we have seen, would render all sin impossible.

2. It may mean, that while this "seed" remaineth he cannot sin. If this seed really does mean supremely benevolent intention, it is true, as we have seen, that while this intention exists no sin can exist with it. Or it may mean, consistently with other scriptures, and with the nature of the case, that such a change has taken place in his sensibility, and in his volitions, as to secure him against living in habitual sin, and prevent his apostacy.

3. In this Epistle John seems to be speaking in very general terms, and in scarcely any part of it can we understand him in any other way, without making him contradict himself and every other writer of the Bible. He says, in another passage, "Whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither known Him;" which, understood strictly, would make him affirm, that if a man committed one sin, he had never been a Christian. Every attentive, intelligent, and candid reader of this Epistle, must know, that John is speaking of the habitual character, as distinguished from individual acts, either of sin or holiness. In this ninth verse, then, he undoubtedly means to affirm, that the new birth does secure a man, or render it certain, that he will not live in sin. As he says in another place, "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world." By this, certainly, he does not mean to say, that in no instance is one who is born of God overcome by the world, and led into sin, but that he who is born of God habitually overcomes the world; that this is his real, bona fide experience.

Obj. Can there be no such thing as weak faith, weak love, and weak repentance? I answer:

1. If you mean comparatively weak, I say, yes. But if you mean weak, in such a sense as to be sinful, I say no. Faith, Repentance, Love, and every Christian grace, properly so called, does and must consist in an act of will, and resolve itself into some modification of supreme, disinterested benevolence. I shall, in a future number, have occasion to show the philosophical nature of faith. Let it suffice here to say, that faith necessarily depends upon the clearness or obscurity of the intellectual apprehensions of truth. Faith, to be real or virtuous, must embrace whatever of truth is apprehended by the intelligence for the time being.

2. Various causes may operate to direct the intelligence from the objects of faith, or to cause the mind to perceive but few of them, and those in comparative obscurity.

3. Faith may be weak, and will certainly necessarily be weak in such cases, in proportion to the obscurity of the views. And yet, if the will or heart confides so far as it apprehends the truth, which it must do to be virtuous at all, faith cannot be weak in such a sense as to be sinful; for if a man confides so far as he apprehends or perceives the truth, so far as faith is concerned, he is doing his whole duty.

4. Faith may be weak in the sense, that it often intermits and gives place to unbelief. But this does not show, that faith and unbelief can co-exist. Unbelief, as might easily be shown, were this the place, when it is spoken of in the Bible as a sin, is disbelief. It is the rejection of truth perceived. Faith is the reception of truth perceived. Faith and unbelief, then, are opposite states of choice, and can by no possibility co-exist.

5. Faith may be weak, in respect to its objects. The disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ knew so little of Him, were so filled with ignorance and the prejudices of education, as to have very weak faith in respect to the Messiahship, power, and divinity of their Master. He complains of them as having but little confidence, and yet it does not appear that they did not implicitly trust Him, so far as they understood Him. And although,

through ignorance, their faith was weak, yet there is no evidence, that when they had any faith at all they did not confide in whatever of truth they apprehended.

Obj. But did not the disciples pray, "Increase our faith"? I answer:

Yes. And by this they must have intended to pray for instruction; for what else could they mean? Unless a man means this, when he prays for faith, he does not know what he prays for. Christ produces faith by enlightening the mind. When we pray for faith we pray for light. And faith, to be real faith at all, must be equal to the light we have. If apprehended truth be not implicitly received, and confided in, there is no faith; but unbelief. If it be that, faith is what it ought to be, wholly unmixed with sin.

Obj. But did not one say to our Lord, "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief," thus implying, that he was in the exercise both of faith and unbelief at the same time? I answer:

1. Yes. But this was not inspiration.
2. It is not certain, that he had any faith at all.
3. If he had, and prayed understandingly, he meant nothing more than to ask for an increase of faith, or for such degree of light as to remove his doubts in respect to the divine power of Christ.

These are the principal objections to the philosophical view I have taken of the simplicity of moral action, that occur to my mind. I will now briefly advert to the consistency of this philosophy with the scriptures.

1. The Bible every where seems to assume, the simplicity of moral action. Christ expressly informed his disciples, that they could not serve God and Mammon. Now by this He did not mean, that a man could not serve God at one time and Mammon at another; but that he could not serve both at the same time. The philosophy that makes it possible for persons to be partly holy and partly sinful at the same time, does make it possible to serve God and Mammon at the same time, and thus flatly contradict the assertion of our Savior.

2. James has expressly settled this philosophy, by saying, that "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." Here he must mean to assert that one sin involves a breach of the whole spirit of the law, and is therefore inconsistent with any degree of holiness existing with it.

3. Christ has expressly taught, that nothing is regeneration, or virtue, but entire obedience, or the renunciation of all selfishness. "Except a man forsake all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."

4. The manner in which the precepts and threatenings of the Bible are usually given, show that nothing is regarded as obedience, or virtue, but doing exactly that which God commands.

5. The common philosophy, that maintains the co-existence of both sin and holiness in the mind at the same time, is virtually Antinomianism. It is a rejection of the law of God as the standard of duty. It maintains, that something is holiness which is less than supreme disinterested benevolence, or the devotion for the time of the whole being to God. Now any philosophy that makes regeneration, or holiness, consist in any thing less than just that measure of obedience which the law of God requires, is Antinomianism. It is a letting down, a rejection of the law of God.

6. The very idea of sin and holiness co-existing in the same mind, is an absurd philosophy, contrary to scripture and common sense. It is an over-looking of that in which holiness consists. Holiness is

obedience to the law of God, and nothing else is. By obedience, I mean entire obedience, or just that which the law requires. Any thing else than that which the law requires is not obedience and is not holiness. To maintain that it is, is to abrogate the law.

I might go to great lengths in the examination of scripture testimony, but it cannot be necessary, or in these letters expedient. I must close this letter, with a few inferences and remarks.

1. It has been supposed by some, that the simplicity of moral action, has been resorted to as a theory by the advocates of entire sanctification in this life, as the only consistent method of carrying out their principle. To this I reply:

(1.) That this theory is held in common, both by those who hold and those who deny the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life.

(2.) The truth of the doctrine does not depend at all upon this philosophical theory for its support: but may be established by Bible testimony, whatever the philosophy of holiness may be.

2. Growth in grace consists in two things:

(1.) In the stability or permanency of holy exercises.

(2.) In their intensity of strength. As knowledge increases Christians will naturally grow in grace, in both these respects.

3. The theory of the mixed character of moral actions, is an eminently dangerous theory, as it leads its advocates to suppose that in their acts of rebellion there is something holy.

It is dangerous because it leads its advocates to place the standard of conversion, or regeneration, exceedingly low; to make regeneration, repentance, true love to God, faith, &c., consistent with the known or conscious commission of present sin. This must be a highly dangerous philosophy. The fact is, that regeneration, or holiness, under any form, is quite another thing than it is supposed to be by those who maintain the philosophy of the mixed character of moral action.

Your Brother in the love and

fellowship of the blessed Gospel,

C.G. FINNEY

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