

Deep-rooted Homosexuality and the Power of Grace

7.2 The sin of same-sex sex as a subset of total depravity and moral responsibility

I. The difficult doctrine of total depravity in relationship to moral responsibility

The focus of this relationship is not on the paradox of sovereignty and responsibility. It is on this assertion: “Fallen man does not have moral ability, but he does have full moral responsibility.” Human beings in the fall are fully responsible for their actions although they are not able to do good, even (especially) the good of acknowledging Christ as Lord to receive salvation.¹ In response, one could argue that if man is morally unable in his actions then he cannot be accountable for them. Moreover, it is easy to reason that if man is accountable because of the clear reality of Judgment Day, then he must have moral ability. Questioning belief in responsibility is hardly controversial, so our present task is to establish the claim that fallen man is not able to do good. There is much in Scripture to support this claim.² These things may come to us as personal assault because we want the mirror on the wall to speak, but not to tell the truth of our natural ugliness.³ Therefore, we need to approach the following considerations cautiously knowing that it is difficult to be true to thine own self.

A. We must begin by understanding what it means to be fallen, for *me* to be fallen.

1. We are slaves to sin in our natural state in the fall

Fallen man does not have moral ability because he is enslaved to sin and free from righteousness: **When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness** (Rom. 6.20). You, the person, not your will, must be *set free* for righteousness (Rom 6.18). Thus, in Scripture, there is no such “thing” as a free will; there is only a free person who chooses and decides within his freedom in contrast to an enslaved person who chooses and decides within his bondage. Accordingly, the natural man cannot understand the things of the Spirit (1 Cor 2.14). In a “typical description of a culture’s decline,” and speaking corporately about the human race as communities, Paul indicates in typical fashion how a society declines “from one level of folly (vv. 18-23) into dishonorable lusts (vv. 24-26) and then into dishonorable passions (including same-sex temptations; vv. 26-27) and finally, if there is no repentance, to a ‘debased mind’ (vv 28-32).⁴ PRS states further on Romans 1: “the human race is a community in which we each bear the scars of others’ sin, not merely our own” because the sins in one generation may be fruits of the sinfulness of society in past generations.⁵ The roots of same-sex sin are deep and complex. Hence, Paul can refer to some of the Corinthians as people who were once characterized and

¹ Paul tells us plainly that no one can say, “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3).

² For clarity I summarize in a blunt way; the intent is not dogmatism but efficiency. My goal is irenic.

³ We deceive ourselves with illusions and when the conscience is disquieted by God’s law, “It begins to fear that it might be living in illusion and untruth, that its values and calculations are unfounded, that it is moving in the wrong direction...this law [is] the great disrupting of the presupposed illusion of “You ought and therefore you can”...a self-entrenching against God...In this illusion man himself is the subject who commands; he is autonomous... refusing to acknowledge God... God makes contact with man at the point where man digs in against him, at the nerve of man’s curving in upon himself. The contact is thus a new creation and a new birth...miracle (Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith: Prolegomena, the Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 144-146.

⁴ PRS, 18

⁵ PRS, 19

marked by a variety of sins including the sinful practice of same-sex sex (1 Cor 6.9-11, **such were some of you**).

2. We cannot decide, choose, or act outside of our evil nature

Like a diseased tree, fallen sinners cannot bear good fruit⁶ (Mat. 7.18) and **the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil** (Mat 12.35). The idea that an evil person out of his evil heart brings forth some good misrepresents the teaching of Jesus that character determines conduct. To make the point by inversion, consider the fact that a loving mother cannot intentionally harm her child; she cannot act outside of her character as a loving mother. Nor can unloving evil people bear good fruit.⁷ Jesus teaches that there is moral inability (because you are evil, you cannot speak good words) and the fact of full responsibility (you will give account for every careless word, which is for absolutely every word by *a fortiori*).

Fallen sinners can do nothing good, nothing whatever.⁸ Hence, Jeremiah argues that fallen man could do something good if the Ethiopian could change his skin or the leopard his spots, but both are impossible, so he is not able to do anything good: **Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil** (Jer.13:23; cf. Gen. 6.5, **wickedness of...his heart was only evil continually**).⁹ This is paradoxical: he has full responsibility and *complete* moral inability.¹⁰

B. We need to evaluate the source of the idea of moral ability

Since Scripture is so clear on the natural man's moral inability (he cannot bring forth good actions, he cannot believe,¹¹ he cannot understand the things of the Spirit,¹² he cannot submit to the law of God¹³), we wonder about the source of the idea of moral ability. What is the biblical basis for tweaking the impact of the large number of *clear* inability texts? There seems to be one line of support: the notion "ought to" implies "able to"; as Geisler claims: the command to believe indicates the ability (freedom and free will) to believe.¹⁴

⁶ The Christian is a good tree and his inability to bring forth bad fruit is eschatological: now in this age, he cannot bring forth the bad fruit of practicing sin, and one day when glorified he will be completely unable to bring forth bad fruit. In the time from conversion to glorification, he still sins but his relationship to sin is radically altered. He acknowledges it and does spiritual battle with it as he makes sometimes painfully slow progress on the path of holiness. For the non-Christian, the inability to do anything good is part of his life in the present evil age.

⁷ However, if character determines conduct, what then do we say about character determining choices such as the choice to study the Scriptures regularly to be shaped by them in submission to Christ for the glory of God? That character determining choice arises from Christian character already, from the renewal of the heart by the Holy Spirit that gives "newness of life" (Rom. 6.4). Otherwise, the natural man cannot submit to the law of God (Rom. 8.7).

⁸ Van Til finds the solution to the good act by asking and answering three questions: "(a) What is the motive of human action? (b) What is the standard of human action? (c) What is the end or purpose of human action? *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971), 3.

⁹ We might say that a serial killer "loves" his mother, but even that love does not meet the three conditions of a good act, so it is not good in the eyes of God.

¹⁰ Note on paradox:

¹¹ John 6.44 ("no one can come to me": no one is able to believe); Romans 8.7 (he cannot submit [in faith] to God).

¹² 1 Cor 2.14

¹³ Rom 8.7

¹⁴ Geisler, *Chosen but Free*, 30.

This belief is a starting point in Kant's philosophy of religion and in the typical defenses of free will.¹⁵ It is allegedly self-evident and intuitive. Hence, it easily takes on presuppositional status. However, there is the serious problem that *this principle opens a flood gate for evil without responsibility* because "if I am morally responsible then I am morally able" logically, by contraposition, implies "If I am not morally able, then I am not morally responsible." The following examples show that these inferences fail because they involve entailments that are highly suspect.

1. The example of Hitler is a *reductio ad absurdum* of Kantian reasoning because it entails the following: if hate driven Hitler was not able to love the Jews then he was not responsible to love them.

2. Worst are least example: if responsibility implies ability, then as a criminal becomes more hardened, he becomes less responsible.

3. Many argue that incestuous desire and action is innate and cannot be altered, so, if persons are not able to do or choose otherwise, then they are not responsible; they commit no sin by practicing incest but only act out who they are in an alternative sexual lifestyle.

4. Commandments example: is the non-Christian responsible to keep the Ten Commandments? Surely, we will say, "Yes!" Is he able to comply with them¹⁶ in their true spirit and intent? Surely, we will say, "he is *not* able."¹⁷ Therefore, responsibility does not imply ability and the philosophical basis for moral ability does not overturn the clear biblical teaching on fallen man's moral inability.¹⁸

Conclusion: the biblical teaching on moral inability *refutes* those who argue that their orientation toward the same sex is inborn and they cannot change who they are, so, it must be natural as another part of God's order and design for human sexuality. Same-sex sex may have very deep roots in nature and nurture in societal development over generations that make it "impossible" to overcome; nonetheless, those who practice it do so with full moral responsibility and come under God's condemning judgment, as is clear in Rom 1:18-32 and 1 Cor 6.9-11.

¹⁵ In Kant's reading of Scripture, it is of the essence of man that the antecedent to every act is an expression of freedom; otherwise, "the use or abuse of man's power of choice in respect of the moral law could not be imputed to him nor could the good or bad in him be called moral," Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt Hudson (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1960). 16. Thus, the tablet of stone for much of modern philosophy and theology has these Kantian inscriptions: "If I am responsible, then I must be able" and "duty demands nothing of us that we can not do" (*Religion* 43). Interestingly, Kant's argument for free will is the *reductio*: without it there is no such thing as morality.

¹⁶ Because of debate about the Law, we should note that this argument has the same weight if we substitute the commandments of Jesus for the Ten Commandments. Or, we might simply ask, "Are we responsible to be holy as God is holy?" Surely, we are responsible even though we are unable.

¹⁷ If he worships false gods, lies, steals, and commits murder, he is accountable, even though he is not able to obey God's precepts. Moreover, if he disobeys the gospel command to repent and believe, he is accountable, even though he is not able to repent and believe. In a word, fallen man does not have free will because he is evil; his nature is evil; his heart is evil. Because he is evil, we reasonably conclude, do we not, that he is all the more responsible? He is fully responsible; he has full responsibility and no "free will."

¹⁸ Cf. the substantive treatment of the three blocks of biblical material that support the bondage of the will in *Historical Theology*, by Cunningham, II, 586-88. By contrast, Wesley affirms and supports a full fledged doctrine of fallen man's moral inability at the beginning of his *Sermon on Free Grace* by noting that free grace does "not depend on any power...in man; no, not in any degree...Whatsoever good is in man, or is done by man, God is the author and doer of it. Thus is his grace free in all; that is, no way depending on any power or merit in man, but on God alone" (par. 3.2, 8-9), even though he ends the sermon by affirming that it is "all who suffer [do the good of allowing] Christ to make them alive" (par. 29.4) that "shall live" (29.3).