

H. Excursus VI: Is Fallen Man's Obligation To Obey God Limited To His Ability To Do So?

Various perfectionistic theologies of sanctification affirm that man's obligation to obey God is limited to his ability to do so.¹ They argue that God would not be fair were He to require of man more than he has the ability to perform. Consequently, fallen men have the ability to obey all that God requires of them. This plenary ability to obey is often ascribed to both unregenerate and regenerate individuals, but is sometimes limited to the latter by certain of its advocates.

Is it true that God would be unjustly mocking fallen man if He demanded and obliged him to obey beyond his ability? No text in the Bible teaches such a doctrine.²

¹ Examples of this idea include Wesley's argument: "Christian perfection . . . [is a state in which people] love God with all their heart, and all men as themselves, [and thus] are Scripturally perfect. And surely such [people on earth] there are; otherwise the promise of God would be a mere mockery of human weakness. Hold fast to this" (cited pg. 123, "The Brighton Convention and Its Opponents." *London Quarterly Review*, October 1875). Likewise in the Oberlin theology: "The sinner has all the faculties and natural attributes requisite to render perfect obedience to God. All he needs is to be induced to use these powers and attributes as he ought" (pgs. 271-272, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, Charles Finney). Indeed, "Finney's theology and 'new measures' rested on 'a doctrine of plenary ability'—the notion that all that is obligated of us we are able to perform and that obligation is limited by ability" (pg. 466, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield*, Fred G. Zaspel). Likewise, "in the seventeenth century . . . the Socinians argued that God cannot require of human beings something that he does not provide," (pg. 279, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, by Richard Muller, vol. 1) an affirmation that led them to affirm that heathen with no knowledge of Christ could be saved (contra John 14:6; Acts 4:12) since they were not able to hear the gospel (pgs. 279, 285, *ibid.*). The Wesleyan and Oberlin perfectionist argumentation equating obligation and ability carried over into the Keswick theology through the teaching at the Broadlands Conference and its successors. As Hannah W. Smith taught at Broadlands: "God commands us to believe, and we can and must believe. God's commands are not grievous, but they would be if He commanded what we could not do. He always provides the power to obey" (pg. 128, *The Life that is Life Indeed: Reminiscences of the Broadlands Conferences*, Edna V. Jackson. London: James Nisbet & Co, 1910). Thus, Broadlands consistently taught that "God gives us power to fulfill what we owe" (pg. 188, *ibid.*). At the Oxford Convention Scriptural commands were "pressed upon us as a command, and therefore a promise" (pg. 333, Pg. 291, *Account of the Union Meeting for the Promotion of Scriptural Holiness, Held at Oxford, August 29 to September 7, 1874*. Chicago: Revell, 1874); consequently, "God's commandment is His enablement. Whatever is believed or suspected to be opposed to His will and to our well-being should be, and can be, renounced, and abandoned at once and for ever. Because it *should be*, it *may be*. This is essentially Keswick teaching" (pg. 92, *The Keswick Convention: Its Message, Its Method, and Its Men*, ed. Harford, emphasis in the original).

² One might allege that Philippians 4:13 supports the idea the idea that man's obligation and ability are coextensive. In the verse, Paul states: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." The fact that that the verse is not absolutely unlimited in its significance is obvious from the fact that Paul is not making a claim to either independent omnipotence or an omnipotence derived from Christ. Omnipotence is an incommunicable Divine attribute. The nature of the limitation of the "all things" is apparent from the context of v. 10-14; Paul is claiming that he can stand, by Christ's strength, whatever "affliction" (v. 14) the Lord allows to come his way; he can be "content" in whatever state of "want" he is in (v. 11), for he says: "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need" (v. 12). Philippians 4:13 teaches the blessed fact that Christ strengthens believers to endure whatever afflictive

The fact that mankind, by its own fault, has sinned in Adam and has a sinful nature, and is thus unable on earth to meet the Divine standard of perfect holiness required by God, illustrates and aggravates human fault rather than providing any ground to ascribe fault to the Holy One, the just Judge of all the earth.³ The idea that human obligation is limited to ability is clearly unscriptural. Were this idea true, Pelagianism would necessarily follow—lost men would, contrary to the affirmations of Scripture (John 6:44, 65), not be enslaved to sin but have the ability to turn to God of themselves. The fact that the unregenerate can commit the unpardonable sin, that is, resist the Holy Spirit to the point that He will no longer draw them to Christ, so that it becomes thenceforth “impossible to renew them again unto repentance” (Hebrews 6:4-6; John 12:32; Matthew 12:31-32) would have to be removed from the realm of Biblical doctrine. Since God’s standard is absolute sinless perfection (Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:15-16), both the unregenerate and the regenerate would have the ability to instantly become, at any given moment, literally sinless in their nature, words, thoughts, and acts. The fact that the saints are commanded

circumstances He allows in their lives. The verse does not establish the unbiblical notion that man’s obligation to obey God is limited to his fallen ability to do so.

Matthew Poole commented on Philippians 4:13: “Having written of the great things he had learned, that it might not be attributed to his proud conceit, or give occasion to any others’ vanity to boast, (as he had recourse before to the Divine efficiency to will and do, Philippians 2:13), [Paul] rests solely for power upon Christ, being found in whom, when he saith he *can do all things*, we are not to understand it absolutely, but restrictively to the subject matter he had before mentioned in the precedent verses, intimating he could by the Lord’s help use well both prosperity and adversity: or, all those things the Lord called him to and put him upon. Not, as the papists urge, that any mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God; but that he by faith being united to Christ, by the power of his Spirit dwelling in him, hath in the Lord righteousness and strength, Isaiah 45:24; and thereupon hath a sincere respect to all God’s commands, as David had, Psalm 119:6; so also had Zacharias and Elisabeth, Luke 1:6; in opposition to Pharisal obedience: not by any power he had of himself, but through Christ strengthening of him, so that God would accept of his sincere performance (though not every way perfect) of what was incumbent on him.”

³ “[L]et it be pointed out that this impotency to measure up to the requirements of God is no mere innocent infirmity, but a highly culpable thing, which greatly aggravates our vileness and adds to our guilt. Our inability to measure up to the standard of personal piety which God has appointed, lies not in a lack of executive power or the needful faculties, but in the want of a willing mind and a ready heart to practice true holiness. If men in a natural state had a hearty love and liking to true holiness, and a fervent and sincere endeavor to practice it, and yet failed in the event, then they might under some pretense plead for this excuse (as many do), that they are compelled to sin by an inevitable necessity. But the fact is that man’s impotency lies in his own obstinacy—”Ye will not come to Me” (John 5:40) said the Lord Jesus. Inability to pay a debt does not excuse a debtor who has recklessly squandered his estate; nor does drunkenness excuse the mad or violent actions of a drunkard, but rather aggravates his crime. God has not lost His right to command, even though man through his wickedness has lost his power to obey. Because the flesh “lusteth against the Spirit” (Galatians 5:17), that is far from an extenuation for not being in subjection to Him. Because “every one that doeth evil hateth the light,” that is far from justifying them because they “loved darkness” (John 3:19, 20); yea, as the Savior there so plainly and solemnly states, it only serves to heighten their criminality—”This is the condemnation.” Then “How much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water?” (Job 15:16) that cannot practice holiness because he will not” (pgs. 43-44, *Doctrine of Sanctification*, Arthur W. Pink).

universally to pray for the forgiveness of their sins (Matthew 6:12-13), that if anyone affirms that he has no sin he is deceived and not of the truth (1 John 1:8-10),⁴ that “*there is no man that sinneth not*” (1 Kings 8:46),⁵ including every one of the people of God on earth, and vast numbers of other Biblical declarations, including the commands a believer obeys partially but not completely (cf. Colossians 3:16),⁶ would have to be ignored or twisted.⁷

⁴ “It has, indeed, been suggested to the writer by a professor of ‘the higher life,’ that John may have referred in verse eight[t] to a self-righteous person, who might say, ‘I have no sin to be forgiven,’ meaning, ‘I have never sinned.’ But it is evident that this letter of the apostle was written to those who were Christians by profession at least, while the language just used would have been an utter and outspoken rejection of Christianity. There is no evidence that any were admitted to the apostolic churches save those who trusted, or professed to trust, in Christ for the pardon of their sins; but there is evidence that some in the churches adopted the Antinomian view, that as Christians they were not under law, but under grace, and therefore could not sin. Against this perversion of the truth Paul had to contend earnestly; but against such a doctrine as the one supposed, namely, that some in the churches claimed that they had *never* sinned, there is no warning or argument in his letters” (pg. 90, *Doctrine of the Higher Christian Life Compared With the Teaching of the Holy Scriptures*, by Alvah Hovey).

⁵ Note that the affirmation of 1 Kings 8:46, and its parallel passage 2 Chronicles 6:36, is not merely that all men, some of whom never consciously or willfully sin, have some remnant of indwelling sin in them. The sin which the passages affirms all men possess, is such that they can say: “we have done perversely, we have committed wickedness,” or “we have sinned, we have done amiss, and have dealt wickedly,” (1 Kings 8:47; 2 Chronicles 6:37), so that all men, including the people of God, actually sin and commit “transgressions wherein they have transgressed against” the Lord (1 Kings 8:50). All men on the earth, including the holiest believers, commit the sort of sins that make them worthy of the Deuteronomic curses, including, for Israel, exile from the promised land (1 Kings 8:47-48; Deuteronomy 28:63-68), and, for all men, horrific earthly judgment and eternal damnation (Deuteronomy 27:11-28:68; Galatians 3:10). Nor was Solomon alone in his view of the universal transgression of men, including the people of God—Ezra affirmed that all the saints, to a man, committed acts worthy of the Deuteronomic curses (Ezra 9:6-7), as did Daniel (9:7-11). The Solomonic affirmation in prayer that all the people of God commit serious acts of sin is a model for the prayer of later believers through history, as evidenced not only by the examples of Ezra and Daniel, but by the Lord Himself (Matthew 6:12-13; Luke 11:4). Scripture does not teach the possibility of believers living a life without any sin or without any acts of known transgression.

⁶ “The answer that is made again and again [by perfectionists to the doctrine that sanctification is progressive, and many commands in the Bible are obeyed partially and in a progressively greater way, is]: Is not Christ able to sanctify us immediately as well as progressively? But it is manifest that the question simply brings us to the . . . problem of accounting for the origin and permitted continuance of evil in the world. Has not Christ power enough to prevent every man and woman and child now in the world, and every man and woman and child that shall be in it till the end of time, from every committing a sin in thought or word or deed? Doubtless he has sufficiency of power. But his infinite wisdom sees reasons, which are to us inscrutable, for not putting forth his power that that effect. And then our opponents should consider that even they do not venture to say that the sanctification of the believer is absolutely complete” (pg. 266, “Means and Measure of Holiness,” Thomas Smith. *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review* (April 1876) 251-280).

⁷ “The [true] doctrine . . . is, that sanctification is never perfected in this life; that sin is not in any case entirely subdued; so that the most advanced believer has need as long as he continues in the flesh, daily to pray for the forgiveness of sins.

The question is not as to the duty of believers. All admit that we are bound to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. Nor is it a question as to the command of God; for the first, original, and universally obligatory commandment is that we should love God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves. Nor does the question concern the provisions of the Gospel. It is admitted that the Gospel

The Baptist professor and college president Alvah Hovey⁸ commented on the idea that the obligation of sinful man is limited to his ability as follows:

[M]oral weakness does not reduce moral obligation. If it did, Satan would be under almost infinitely less obligation to love God than Gabriel, and, the farther any being advanced in sin, the less of service would be due from him to his Maker. The law, as a standard of right and duty, has not been modified by the work of Christ: it has rather been honored and sustained. The theory of one law for angels, another for Adam before the fall, and still another for believers in Christ, is without any foundation in the Word of God. It is impossible to doubt that the law for all moral beings, in all worlds, is one and the same. To love God with all the spiritual ardor and energy of their undivided being is their simple duty. . . . Do any Christians live without sin in this world? All are commanded to do so by an authority inseparable from their moral being[.] . . . This voice forbids every feeling, purpose, and act that is wrong, and enjoins perfect and perpetual rectitude in heart, as well as in life. . . . [T]he law of God, as set forth in the Bible, require[s] of all a life without sin. . . .

Of what use are precepts and exhortations, it is asked, if Christians are never to comply with them? [The perfectionist argues that] [t]he law was given to Christians to be obeyed, and it is surely safe to conclude that it will be obeyed by some in this life.⁹ . . . To this it must be answered

provides all that is needed for the complete sanctification and salvation of believers. What can we need more than we have in Christ, his Spirit, his word and his ordinances? Nor does it concern the promises of God; for all rejoice in the hope, founded on the divine promise, that we shall be ultimately delivered from all sin. God has in Christ made provision for the complete salvation of his people: that is, for their entire deliverance from the penalty of the law, from the power of sin, from all sorrow, pain, and death; and not only for mere negative deliverance, but for their being transformed into the image of Christ, filled with his Spirit, and glorified by the beauty of the Lord. It is, however, too plain that, unless sanctification be an exception, no one of these promises besides that which concerns justification, is perfectly fulfilled in this life. Justification does not admit of degrees. A man either is under condemnation, or he is not. And, therefore, from the nature of the case, justification is instantaneous and complete, as soon as the sinner believes. But the question is, whether, when God promises to make his people perfectly holy, perfectly happy, and perfectly glorious, He thereby promises to make them perfect in holiness in this life? If the promises of happiness and glory are not perfectly fulfilled in this life, why should the promise of sanctification be thus fulfilled? It is, however, a mere question of fact. All admit that God can render his people perfect before death as well as after it. The only question is, Has He promised, with regard to sanctification alone, that it shall be perfected on this side of the grave? and, Do we see cases in which the promise has been actually fulfilled? The answer given to these questions by the Church . . . is in the negative. So long as the believer is in this world, he will need to pray for pardon.” (*Systematic Theology*, Charles Hodge, 3:18:7)

⁸ Dr. Hovey pastored a Baptist church in New Gloucester, Maine, and then taught Hebrew, church history, theology, and Christian ethics at the Newton theological institution, a Baptist college, for a number of decades, starting in 1849. He became the president of the college in 1868, the year he also became a member of the executive committee of the American Baptist missionary union, a position he held until 1883. He was also the general editor of the *American Commentary on the New Testament* series.

⁹ Thomas Smith discusses this particular argument, as made by Oberlin perfectionist Asa Mahan: Dr. Mahan argues from the precepts and the prayers of Scripture that perfection must be attainable in this life. He finds, for example, such a precept as [Matthew 5:48], and such a prayer on behalf of Christians as that of the apostle, “The God of peace . . . make you perfect in every good work, to do his will.” [Hebrews 13:20-21; note that the progressive nature of the perfecting, indicated in the “working in you that which is wellpleasing in His sight” (ποιῶν ἐν ὑμῖν τὸ εὐάρεστον ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ) clause, is overlooked.] Is it conceivable, [Mahan] asks, that our Lord would have given such a precept [as Matthew 5:48], unless in some way it could be fulfilled by those to whom he addressed it; or that the apostle should have been inspired to utter such a prayer, unless He that inspired the prayer had been willing to answer it? In answer to this, it may probably be enough to say that surely God’s right to require is not impaired by the inability that we have brought upon ourselves to render the service that is due to him. Dr. Mahan is well enough acquainted with the ordinary view of such texts, that the Christian has set before him the standard of absolute perfection, and that he is required to strive to come ever nearer and nearer to it; and that he shall assuredly, by the grace of God,

that it is manifestly unsafe to infer the moral perfection of even a few Christians from the circumstance that all are commanded or exhorted to be perfect. It would be quite as logical to assume that all Christians obey the law completely from the hour of their conversion, as to assume that some obey it thus for a month or a year. But the premise warrants neither conclusion. If a moral law be given by the Most High, it must naturally be a perfect rule of right, whether it be kept by many or by none. Nor can it be pronounced useless, though it be kept by none, It may be of great service because it reveals the right, or what Christians ought to be and to do, and because it shows to those who are saved by Christ the degree of sin in their hearts and lives, together with the wonderous grace of God to his wayward children. . . . [Nor is it valid when it is] suggested that, if none of them are sanctified fully before the hour of death, it must be because God is either unable or unwilling thus to sanctify them . . . [in light of the fact that 1 Thessalonians 4:3 states,] “This is the will of God, your sanctification.”¹⁰ . . . [For] are we not assured by the same apostle that it is the will of God that “all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4)? And would it not be hasty reasoning to conclude from this language that all men will be saved? Besides, it may be truly said, that God wishes not only that some Christians, but that *all* Christians, and indeed all moral beings in the universe, should be wholly free from sin, from this instant onward through eternal ages; nay, that he has always wished this in respect to all such beings; but we do not therefore conclude that there will be no more sin, or that there never has been sin. . . . [Texts such as 1 Thessalonians 4:3] se[t] forth what Christians ought to do in obedience to the will of God, not what he proposes to do in their hearts [at some instant in this life]. Yet in doing this they have the gift and aid of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

Likewise, B. B. Warfield explained the necessary consequences of the doctrine that human moral obligation is limited to his fallen ability:

To be perfect, [according to the doctrine that obligation is limited to ability, a sinner] does not [need] to love as God loves — in whose love all righteousness is embraced — or as the angels love, or as Adam loved, or even as any better man than he loves. He only requires to love as he himself, being what he is, and in the condition in which he finds himself, can love. If he loves all he can love in his present condition, he is perfect. No matter how he came into his present condition; suppose if you will that he came into it by a long course of vice, or by some supreme act of vice, it makes no difference. His obligation is limited by his ability; we cannot say, he ought to do more than he can do; if he does all he can do, he has no further obligation, he is perfect. The

ultimately attain to it. Now, will he have the goodness, without admitting that this view is correct, to make the supposition that [if] it were correct[,] would not all such precepts and prayers be easily explicable in accordance with that supposition? But now let us, on the other hand, suppose that his view is correct, what follows, but that a great portion of the Scriptures is wholly inapplicable to a large, and ever enlarging [as more people achieve perfection through the teaching of Mahan and other perfectionists], number of believers? As the law is for the disobedient, surely precepts and exhortations are for the imperfect. Was there no one amongst the disciples on the mount, no one among those Hebrews who had been illuminated, and had endured a great fight of afflictions, who knew in themselves that they had in heaven a better and an enduring substance,—no one amongst all these who had attained such perfection as Dr. Mahan and his friends have attained? If there were but one such, he might have said, he must have felt, O Lord, this precept is not for me; O Paul, this prayer is not for me. (pgs. 275-276, “Means and Measure of Holiness,” Thomas Smith. *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review* (April 1876) 251-280)

¹⁰ Snodgrass further observes concerning 1 Thessalonians 4:3: “That full provision is made for consummating the work of sanctification, as well as for its commencement and progress, is not doubted by any. All evangelical Christians agree that when the Apostle says, ‘This is the will of God, even your sanctification,’ he has in view the entire deliverance of those who embrace the Gospel from the power and pollution of sin. . . . But the certainty of an event, and the time at which we are authorized to expect it, are two different things. And the question now arises, Are we authorized to believe that God will ever consummate the sanctification of his people within the limits of the present life [rather than at their glorification?]]” (pgs. 18-19, *The Scripture Doctrine of Sanctification*). Snodgrass rightly answers this question in the negative.

¹¹ Pgs. 62, 73-75, *Doctrine of the Higher Christian Life Compared With the Teaching of the Holy Scriptures*, by Alvah Hovey.

moral idiot . . . is as perfect as God is: being a moral idiot, he has no moral obligation; when he has done nothing at all he has done all that he ought to do: he is perfect. God Himself cannot do more than all He ought to do; and when He has done all He ought to do, He is no more perfect than the moral idiot is—although what He has done is to fulfil all that is ideally righteous and the moral idiot has done nothing.

In this conception the law of God, complete obedience to which is perfection, is made a sliding scale. It is not that perfect rule, which as the Greeks say, like a straight-edge, straight itself, measures both the straight and the crooked; but a flexible line which follows the inequalities of the surface on which it is laid, not molding it, but molded by it. Obligation here is interpreted in terms of ability with the result that each man becomes a law to himself, creating his own law; while the objective law of God, the standard of holiness in all, is annulled, and there are as many laws, as many standards of holiness, as there are moral beings. . . . There is no such thing as a universal obligation of the law . . . or indeed as a universal law, binding on all alike, to create a universal obligation. Each man's obligation is exhausted in the law which his own ability creates for him; . . . the requirements of the law [being reduced] to the moral capacity of sinful men, [and] adjust[ed] in detail [down] to the moral capacity of each individual sinner . . . has the effect of making our sin the excuse for our sin, until we may cease to be sinners altogether by simply becoming sinful enough. . . . [T]he acquisition of unconquerable habits of evil, by progressively destroying obligation, renders perfection ever easier of acquisition by constantly reducing the content of the perfection to be acquired; and [thus] one of the surest roads to salvation [and perfection] is therefore to become incurably wicked.¹²

Similarly, William G. T. Shedd wrote:

The foundation of man's obligation to perfectly obey the Divine law, was the holiness and plenary power to good with which he was endowed by his Creator. Because God made man in his own image, he was obliged to sinless obedience. Moral obligation rested upon the union and combination of the so-called "natural ability" with the "moral." It did not rest upon the first alone. Not a will without any inclination, but a will with a holy inclination, was the basis of the requirement of sinless obedience. The possession of a will undetermined would not constitute man a moral agent. God did not make man without moral character, and then require perfect obedience from him. When man was created and placed under law, he was endowed not only with the faculties of a man, but with those faculties in a normal condition. The understanding was spiritually enlightened, and the will was rightly inclined. He had both "natural" and "moral" ability. He had real and plenary power to obey the law of God. In the beginning of man's moral existence, ability must equal obligation. And the ability did equal it. Kant's dictum: "I ought, therefore I can," was true of holy Adam and his posterity in him. If at the instant man came from the hand of God he had been unable to obey, he would not have been obligated to obey.

"The law was not above man's strength when he was possessed of original righteousness, though it be above man's strength since he was stripped of original righteousness. The command was dated before man had contracted his impotency, when he had a power to keep it, as well as to break it. Had it been enjoined to man only after the fall, and not before, he might have had a better pretence to excuse himself, because of the impossibility of it; yet he would not have had sufficient excuse, since the impossibility did not result from the nature of the law, but from the corrupted nature of the creature. It 'was weak through the flesh' (Romans 8:3), but it was promulged when man had a strength proportioned to the commands of it." (Charnock: *The Holiness of God*.)

Obligation being thus founded upon the Creator's gifts, cannot be destroyed by any subsequent action of the creature. If he destroys his ability, he does not destroy his obligation. If man by his own voluntary action loses any or all of the talents entrusted to him, he cannot assign this loss as a reason why any or all the talents, together with usury, should not be demanded of him in the final settlement. [Note] Christ's parable of the talents. . . . Does not God, then, wrong man by requiring of him in his law that which he cannot perform? . . . No; for God so made man that he could perform it; but man through the instigation of the devil, by wilful disobedience deprived himself and all his posterity of this power.

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Pgs. 42-43, *Perfectionism*, vol. 2, Warfield.

1.) It is objected, that if man is unable to keep the law, he is not obligated to keep it. This depends upon the *nature* of the inability, and its *cause*. If man were destitute of reason, conscience, will, or any of the faculties of a moral being, he would not be obligated. If he were internally wrought upon by an almighty being, and prevented from obeying, he would not be obligated. If he were prevented by any external compulsion, he would not be obligated. If he had been created sinful, he would not be obligated. If he had been created indifferent either to holiness or sin, he would not have been obligated. None of these conditions obtain in the case of man. He was created holy, with plenary power to keep perfectly the moral law, and therefore was obligated to keep it. At the point of creation, ability and obligation were equal. But if after creation in holiness and plenary power, any alteration be made in the original ratio between ability and obligation by the creature's voluntary agency, this cannot alter the original obligation. If ability is weakened by an act of self-determination, obligation is not weakened. If ability is totally destroyed by self-determination, obligation is not destroyed. The latter is the fact in the case. There is a total inability, but it is not an original or created inability. It came to be by man's act, not by God's. "Man's inability to restore what he owes to God, an inability brought upon himself, does not excuse man from paying the satisfaction due to justice; for the result of sin cannot excuse the sin itself." (Anselm: *Cur deus homo*, I. xxiv.)

The principle, that if a moral power once possessed is lost by the voluntary action of the possessor he is not thereby released from the original duty that rested upon it, is acknowledged by writers upon ethics. Aristotle (*Ethics*, III. v.) remarks that it is just in legislators[:]

to punish people even for ignorance itself, if they are the cause of their own ignorance; just as the punishment is double for drunken people. For the cause is in themselves; since it was in their own power not to get drunk, and drunkenness is the cause of their ignorance. And they punish those who are ignorant of anything in the laws which they ought to know, and which it is not difficult to know; and likewise in all other cases in which they are ignorant through negligence; upon the ground that it was in their own power to pay attention to it. But perhaps a person is unable to give his attention? But he himself is the cause of this inability, by living in a dissipated manner. Persons are themselves the causes of their being unrighteous, by performing bad actions; and of being intemperate, by passing their time in drunken revels and such-like. When a man does those acts by which he becomes unjust, he becomes unjust voluntarily [that is by the action of his own will]. Nevertheless, he will not be able to leave off being unjust and to become just, whenever he pleases. For the sick man cannot become well whenever he pleases, even though it so happen that he is voluntarily sick owing to an incontinent life, and from disobedience to physicians. At the time indeed, it was in his own power not to be sick; but when he has once allowed himself to become sick, it is no longer in his power not to be sick; just as it is no longer in the power of a man who has thrown a stone to recover it. And yet the throwing of it was in his own power; for the origin of the action was in his own power. In like manner, in the beginning it was in the power of the unjust and the intemperate man not to become unjust and intemperate; and therefore they are so voluntarily. But when they have become so, it is no longer in their power to avoid being unjust and intemperate... And not only are the faults of the soul voluntary, but in some persons those of the body are so likewise, and with these we find fault. For no one finds fault with those who are disfigured and ugly by birth; but only with those who are so through neglect of gymnastic exercise, or through carelessness. The case is the same with bodily weakness and mutilation. For no one would blame a man who is born blind, or who is blind from disease or a blow; but would rather pity him. But everybody would blame the man who is blind from drunkenness, or any intemperance. For those faults of the body which are incur[red] [by our] own power originally, and which result from our own action, we are blamable." . . .

In secular commercial life, the loss of ability does not release from obligation. A man is as much a debtor to his creditors after his bankruptcy, as he was before. The loss of his property does not free him from indebtedness. He cannot say to his creditor, "I owed you yesterday, because I was able to pay you, but to-day I owe you nothing, because I am a bankrupt." It is a legal maxim, that bankruptcy does not invalidate contracts.

That obligation remains fixed and immutable under all the modifications of ability introduced

by the action of the human will, is proved by the case of the drunkard, and the habit which he has formed. The drunkard is certainly *less* able to obey the law of temperance than the temperate man is. But this law has precisely the same claim upon him that it has upon the temperate. The diminution of ability has not diminished the obligation. If obligation must always keep pace with the changes in the ability, then there are degrees of obligation. The stronger the will is, the more it is obliged; the weaker it is, the less is it bound by law. In this case, sin rewards the sinner by delivering him from the claims of law. The most vicious man would be least under obligation to duty.¹³

Both the unregenerate and the regenerate are obligated to be as holy as God Himself, and no unconverted person, neither any believer before his glorification, will meet this Divine standard of absolute perfection. The idea that the sinner's obligation to God is limited to his ability is entirely contrary to Scripture.

¹³ Shedd, *Anthropology* Chapter 5, pgs. 52-56. W. D. Snodgrass also effectively demolishes what he calls the "radical error, that the extent of our powers, fallen as we are, is the ground and measure of our obligation" (pgs. 21-27, 49-52, *The Scripture Doctrine of Sanctification*).