

Freedom of the Will

Jonathan Edwards

Part III

**WHEREIN IT IS CONSIDERED WHETHER THERE IS OR CAN BE ANY SORT OF
FREEDOM OF WILL,
AS THAT WHEREIN ARMINIANS PLACE THE ESSENCE OF THE LIBERTY OF ALL
MORAL AGENTS;
AND WHETHER ANY SUCH THING EVER WAS OR**

Section 4.

Command and Obligation to Obedience, consistent with moral Inability to obey.

IT being so much insisted on by Arminian writers, that necessity is inconsistent with law or command, and particularly, that it is absurd to suppose God by his command should require that of men which they are unable to do; not allowing in this case for any difference between natural and moral Inability; I would therefore now particularly consider this matter.— And for greater clearness I would distinctly lay down the following things.

I. The Will itself, and not only those actions which are the effects of the will, is the proper object of Precept or Command. That is, such a state or acts of men's Wills, are in many cases properly required of them by Commands; and not only those alterations in the state of their bodies or minds that are the consequences of volition. This is most manifest; for it is the soul only that is properly and directly the subject of Precepts or Commands; that only being capable of receiving or perceiving Commands. The motions or state of the body are matter of Command, only as they are subject to the soul, and connected with its acts. But now the soul has no other faculty whereby it can, in the most direct and proper sense, consent, yield to, or comply with any Command, but the faculty of the Will; and it is by this faculty only, that the soul can directly disobey, or refuse compliance: for the very notions of consenting, yielding, accepting, complying, refusing, rejecting, &c. are, according to the meaning of the terms, nothing but certain acts of the will. Obedience, in the primary nature of it, is the submitting and yielding of the Will of one, to the will of another. Disobedience is the not consenting, not complying of the Will of the commanded, to the manifested Will of the commander. Other acts that are not the acts of the Will, as certain motions of the body and alterations in the soul, are Obedience or Disobedience only indirectly, as they are connected with the state or actions of the will, according to an established law of nature. So that it is manifest, the Will itself may be required: and the being of a good Will is the most proper, direct, and immediate subject of Command; and if this cannot be prescribed or required by

Command or Precept, nothing can; for other things can be required no otherwise than as they depend upon, and are the fruits of a good Will.

Corol. 1. If there be several acts of the Will, or a series of acts, one following another, and one the effect of another, the first and determining act is properly the subject of Command, and not only the consequent acts, which are dependent upon it. Yea, this more especially is that to which Command or Precept has a proper respect; because it is this act that determines the whole affair: in this act the Obedience or Disobedience lies, in a peculiar manner; the consequent acts being all governed and determined by it. This governing act must be the proper object of Precept, or none.

Corol. 2. It also follows, from what has been observed, that if there be any act, or exertion of the soul, prior to all free acts of choice in the case, directing and determining what the acts of the Will shall be; that act of the soul cannot properly be subject to any Command or Precept, in any respect whatsoever, either directly or indirectly, immediately or remotely. Such acts cannot be subject to Commands directly, because they are no acts of the Will; being by the supposition prior to all acts of the Will, determining and giving rise to all its acts: they not being acts of the Will, there can be in them no consent to or compliance with any Command. Neither can they be subject to Command or Precept indirectly or remotely; for they are not so much as the sects or consequences of the Will, being prior to all its acts. So that if there be any Obedience in that original act of the soul, determining all volitions, it is an act of Obedience wherein the Will has no concern at all; it preceding every act of Will. And therefore, if the soul either obeys or disobeys in this act, it is wholly involuntarily; there is no willing Obedience or rebellion, no compliance or opposition of the Will in the affair: and what sort of Obedience or rebellion is this?

And thus the Arminian notion of the freedom of the will consisting in the soul's determining its own acts of Will, instead of being essential to moral agency, and to men being the subjects of moral government, is utterly inconsistent with it. For if the soul determines all its acts of Will, it is therein subject to no Command or moral government, as has been now observed; because its original determining act is no act of Will or choice, it being prior, by the supposition, to every act of Will. And the soul cannot be the subject of Command in the act of the Will itself, which depends on the foregoing determining act, and is determined by it; in as much as this is necessary, being the necessary consequence and effect of that prior determining act, which is not voluntary. Nor can the man be the subject of Command or government in his external actions; because these are all necessary, being the necessary effects of the acts of the Will themselves. So that mankind, according to this scheme, are subjects of Command or moral government in nothing at all; and all their moral agency is entirely excluded, and no room is left for virtue or vice in the world.

So that the Arminian scheme, and not that of the Calvinists, is utterly inconsistent with moral government, and with all use of laws, precepts, prohibitions, promises, or threatenings. Neither is there any way whatsoever to make their principles consist with these things. For if it be said, that there is no prior determining act of the soul, preceding

the acts of the Will, but that volitions are events that come to pass by pure accident, without any determining cause, this is most palpably inconsistent with all use of laws and precepts; for nothing is more plain than that laws can be of no use to direct and regulate perfect accident: which, by the supposition of its being pure accident, is in no case regulated by any thing preceding; but happens, this way or that, perfectly by chance, without any cause or rule. The perfect uselessness of laws and precepts also follows from the Arminian notion of indifference, as essential to that liberty, which is requisite to virtue or vice. For the end of laws is to bind to one side; and the end of Commands is to turn the Will one way: and therefore they are of no use, unless they turn or bias the Will that way. But if liberty consists in indifference, then their biasing the Will one way only, destroys liberty; as it puts the Will out of equilibrium. So that the will, having a bias, through the influence of binding law, laid upon it, is not wholly left to itself, to determine itself which way it will, without influence from without.

II. Having shown that the Will itself, especially in those acts which are original, leading and determining in any case, is the proper subject of Precept and Command — and not only those alterations in the body, &c. which are the effects of the Will — I now proceed, in the second place, to observe, that the very opposition or defect of the Will itself, in its original and determining act in the case, to a thing proposed or commanded, or its failing of compliance, implies a moral inability to that thing: or, in other words, whenever a Command requires a certain state or act of the Will, and the person commanded, notwithstanding the Command and the circumstances under which it is exhibited, still finds his will opposite or wanting, in that, belonging to its state or acts, which is original and determining in the affair, that man is morally unable to obey that Command.

This is manifest from what was observed in the first part concerning the nature of moral Inability, as distinguished from natural: where it was observed, that a man may then be said to be morally unable to do a thing, when he is under the influence or prevalence of a contrary inclination, or has a want of inclination, under such circumstances and views. It is also evident, from what has been before proved, that the Will is always, and in every individual act, necessarily determined by the strongest motive; and so is always unable to go against the motive, which, all things considered, has now the greatest strength and advantage to move the Will.— But not further to insist on these things, the truth of the position now laid down, viz. that when the Will is opposite to, or failing of a compliance with, a thing, in its original determination or act, it is not able to comply, appears by the consideration of these two things.

1. The Will in the time of that diverse or opposite leading act or inclination, and when actually under its influence, is not able to exert itself to the contrary, to make an alteration, in order to a compliance. The inclination is unable to change itself; and that for this plain reason, that it is unable to incline to change itself. Present choice cannot at present choose to be otherwise: for that would be at present to choose something diverse from what is at present chosen. If the will, all things now considered, inclines or chooses to go that way, then it cannot choose, all things now considered, to go the other way, and so cannot choose to be made to go the other way. To suppose that the mind is now sincerely inclined to change itself to a different inclination, is to suppose the

mind is now truly inclined otherwise than it is now inclined. The Will may oppose some future remote act that it is exposed to, but not its own present act.

2. As it is impossible that the Will should comply with the thing commanded, with respect to its leading act, by any act of its own, in the time of that diverse or opposite leading and original act, or after it has actually come under the influence of that determining choice or inclination; so it is impossible it should be determined to a compliance by any foregoing act; for, by the very supposition, there is no foregoing act; the opposite or noncomplying act being that act which is original and determining in the case. Therefore it must be so, that if this first determining act be found non-complying, on the proposal of the command, the mind is morally unable to obey. For to suppose it to be able to obey, is to suppose it to be able to determine and cause its first determining act to be otherwise, and that it has power better to govern and regulate its first governing and regulating act, which is absurd; for it is to suppose a prior act of the Will, determining its first determining act; that is, an act prior to the first, and leading and governing the original and governing act of all; which is a contradiction.

Here if it should be said, that although the mind has not any ability to will contrary to what it does will, in the original and leading act of the Will, because there is supposed to be no prior act to determine and order it otherwise, and the will cannot immediately change itself, because it cannot at present incline to a change; yet the mind has an ability for the present to forbear to proceed to action, and taking time for deliberation; which may be an occasion of the change of the inclination.

I answer, (1.) In this objection, that seems to be forgotten which was observed before, viz. that the determining to take the matter into consideration, is itself an act of the Will: and if this be all the act wherein the mind exercises ability and freedom, then this, by the supposition, must be all that can be commanded or required by precept. And if this act be the commanding act, then all that has been observed concerning the commanding act of the Will remains true, that the very want of it is a moral Inability to exert it, &c. (2.) We are speaking concerning the first and leading act of the will about the affair; and if determining to deliberate, or, on the contrary, to proceed immediately without deliberating, be the first and leading act; or whether it be or no, if there be another act before it, which determines that; or whatever be the original and leading act; still the foregoing proof stands good, that the non-compliance of the leading act implies moral Inability to comply.

If it should be objected, that these things make all moral Inability equal, and suppose men morally unable to will otherwise than they actually do will, in all cases, and equally so in every instance.— In answer to this objection, I desire two things may be observed.

First, That if by being equally unable, be meant, as really unable; then, so far as the Inability is merely moral, it is true; the will, in every instance, acts by moral necessity, and is morally unable to act otherwise, as truly and properly in one case as another; as, I humbly conceive, has been perfectly and abundantly demonstrated by what has been said in the preceding part of this essay. But yet, in some respect, the Inability may be

said to be greater in some instances than others: though the man may be truly unable, (if moral inability can truly be called Inability.) yet he may be further from being able to do Some things than others. As it is in things, which men are naturally unable to do. A person, whose strength is no more than sufficient to lift the weight of one hundred pounds, is as truly and really unable to lift one hundred and one pounds, as ten thousand pounds; but yet he is further from being able to lift the latter weight than the former; and so, according to the common use of speech, has a greater Inability for it. So it is in moral Inability. A man is truly morally unable to choose contrary to a present inclination, which in the least degree prevails; or, contrary to that motive, which, all things considered, has strength and advantage now to move the Will, in the least degree, superior to all other motives in view: but yet he is further from ability to resist a very strong habit, and a violent and deeply rooted inclination, or a motive vastly exceeding all others in strength. And again, the Inability may, in some respects, be called greater in some instances than others, as it may be more general and extensive to all acts of that kind. So men may be said to be unable in a different sense, and to be further from moral ability, who have that moral Inability which is general and habitual, than they who have only that Inability which is occasional and particular. Thus in cases of natural inability; he that is born blind may be said to be unable to see, in a different manner, and is, in some respects, further from being able to see, than he whose sight is hindered by a transient cloud or mist.

And besides, that which was observed in the first part of this discourse, concerning the Inability which attends a strong and settled habit, should be there remembered; viz. that a fixed habit is attended with this peculiar moral inability, by which it is distinguished from occasional volition, namely, that endeavours to avoid future volitions of that kind, which are agreeable to such a habit, much more frequently and commonly prove vain and insufficient. For though it is impossible there should be any sincere endeavours against a present choice, yet there may be against volitions of that kind, when viewed at a distance. A person may desire and use means to prevent future exercises of a certain inclination; and, in order to it, may wish the habit might be removed; but his desires and endeavours may be ineffectual. The man may be said in some sense to be unable; yea, even as the word unable is a relative term, and has relation to ineffectual endeavours; yet not with regard to present, but remote endeavours.

Secondly, It must be borne in mind, according to what was observed before, that indeed no Inability whatsoever, which is merely moral, is properly called by the name of Inability; and that in the strictest propriety of speech, a man may be said to have a thing in his power, if he has it at his election, and he cannot be said to be unable to do a thing, when he can, if he now pleases, or whenever he has a proper, direct, and immediate desire for it. As to those desires and endeavours, that may be against the exercises of a strong habit, with regard to which men may be said to be unable to avoid those exercises, they are remote desires and endeavours in two respects. First, as to time; they are never against present volitions, but only against volitions of such a kind, when viewed at a distance. Secondly, as to their nature; these opposite desires are not directly and properly against the habit and inclination itself, or the volitions in which it is exercised; for these, in themselves considered, are agreeable: but against something

else that attends them, or is their consequence; the opposition of the mind is leveled entirely against this; the volitions themselves are not at all opposed directly, and for their own sake; but only indirectly and remotely, on the account of something foreign.

III. Though the opposition of the Will itself, or the very want of Will to a thing commanded, implies a moral inability to that thing; yet, if it be, as has been already shown, that the being of a good state or act of will, is a thing most properly required by Command; then, in some cases, such a state or act of Will may properly be required, which at present is not, and which may also be wanting after it is commanded. And therefore those things may properly be commanded, for which men have a moral Inability.

Such a state or act of the Will, may be required by Command, as does not already exist. For if that volition only may be commanded to be, which already is, there could be no use of precept: Commands in all cases would be perfectly vain and impertinent. And not only may such a Will be required, as is wanting before the Command is given, but also such as may possibly be wanting afterwards; such as the exhibition of the Command may not be effectual to produce or excite. Otherwise, no such thing as disobedience to a proper and rightful Command is possible in any case; and there is no case possible, wherein there can be a faulty disobedience. Which Arminians cannot affirm, consistently with their principle: for this makes obedience to just and proper Commands always necessary, and disobedience impossible. And so the Arminian would overthrow himself, yielding the very point we are upon, which he so strenuously denies, viz. that Law and Command are consistent with necessity.

If merely that Inability will excuse disobedience, which is implied in the opposition or defect of inclination, remaining after the Command is exhibited, then wickedness always carries that in it which excuses it. By how much the more wickedness there is in a man's heart, by so much is his inclination to evil the stronger, and by so much the more, therefore, has he of moral Inability to the good required. His moral Inability consisting in the strength of his evil inclination, is the very thing wherein his wickedness consists; and yet, according to Arminian principles, it must be a thing inconsistent with wickedness; and by how much the more he has of it, by so much is he the further from wickedness.

Therefore, on the whole, it is manifest, that moral Inability alone (which consists in disinclination) never renders any thing improperly the subject matter of Precept or Command, and never can excuse any person in disobedience, or want of conformity to a command.

Natural Inability, arising from the want of natural capacity, or external hindrance, (which alone is properly called Inability,) without doubt wholly excuses, or makes a thing improperly the matter of Command. If men are excused from doing or acting any good thing, supposed to be commanded, it must be through some defect or obstacle that is not in the Will itself, but either in the capacity of understanding, or body, or outward circumstances.— Here two or three things may be observed,

1. As to spiritual acts, or any good thing in the state or imminent acts of the will itself, or of the affections, (which are only certain modes of the exercise of the Will,) if persons are justly excused, it must be through want of capacity in the natural faculty of understanding. Thus the same spiritual duties, or holy affections and exercises of heart, cannot be required of men, as may be of angels; the capacity of understanding being so much inferior. So men cannot be required to love those amiable persons, whom they have had no opportunity to see, or hear of, or know in any way agreeable to the natural state and capacity of the human understanding. But the insufficiency of motives will not excuse; unless their being insufficient arises not from the moral state of the Will or inclination itself, but from the state of the natural understanding. The great kindness and generosity of another may be a motive insufficient to excite gratitude in the person that receives the kindness, through his vile and ungrateful temper: in this case, the insufficiency of the motive arises from the state of the Will or inclination of heart, and does not at all excuse. But if this generosity is not sufficient to excite gratitude, being unknown, there being no means of information adequate to the state and measure of the person's faculties, this insufficiency is attended with a natural Inability, which entirely excuses it.

2. As to such motions of body, or exercises and alterations of mind, which do not consist in the imminent acts or state of the Will itself — but are supposed to be required as effects of the will, in cases wherein there is no want of a capacity of understanding that inability, and that only, excuses, which consists in want of connexion between them and the Will. If the will fully complies, and the proposed effect does not prove, according to the laws of nature, to be connected with his volition, the man is perfectly excused; he has a natural Inability to the thing required. For the Will itself, as has been observed, is all that can be directly and immediately required by Command; and other things only indirectly, as connected with the Will. If therefore, there be a full compliance of Will, the person has done his duty; and if other things do not prove to be connected with his volition, that is not criminally owing to him.

3. Both these kinds of natural Inability, and all Inability that excuses, may be resolved into one thing; namely, want of natural capacity or strength; either capacity of understanding, or external strength. For when there are external defects and obstacles, they would be no obstacles, were it not for the imperfection and limitations of understanding and strength.

Corol. If things for which men have a moral Inability may properly be the matter of Precept or Command, then they may also of invitation and counsel. Commands and invitations come very much to the same thing; the difference is only circumstantial: Commands are as much a manifestation of the will of him that speaks, as invitations, and as much testimonies of expectation of compliance. The difference between them lies in nothing that touches the affair in hand. The main difference between Command and invitation consists in the enforcement of the Will of him who commands or invites. In the latter it is his kindness, the goodness from which his Will arises: in the former it is his authority. But whatever be the ground of Will in him that speaks, or the enforcement of what he says, yet, seeing neither his Will, nor his expectation, is any more testified in

the one case than the other; therefore, a person being directed by invitation, is no more an evidence of insincerity in him that directs — in manifesting either a Will or expectation which he has not — than a person being known to be morally unable to do what he is directed by command is an evidence of insincerity. So that all this grand objection of Arminians against the Inability of fallen men to exert faith in Christ, or to perform other spiritual duties, from the sincerity of God's counsels and invitations, must be without force.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).