

**060813 Man's Deficiency: Ability and Motive 21/28 August 13, 2006GG**  
**Man's Deficiency: Ability and Motive**

**Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"**

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*What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes. ([Ro 3:9-18](#))*

*So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. ([Ro 8:8](#))*

*But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. ([1Co 2:14](#))* What is the real problem with fallen, unregenerate humanity? Is it ability or is it motive? Those who follow more or less the Pelagian/Arminian view of theology will assert that man retains the ability to please God, so they view their primary mission in preaching as motivating fallen man to do the right thing. As we have learned in our study of the impact the fall had on Adam and all of subsequent humanity, man lost the ability *and* the motive to do good.

In the last chapter I focused on [Ro 3:9-18](#). These verses emphasize fallen sinful man's actual conduct, but in so doing they speak both to man's ability and his motive. Perhaps man's motive leads this description of man's fallen sinfulness, for motive drives conduct. To further make the point this week's verses add Roman's 8:8, a verse which concludes a tightly reasoned lesson from Paul in the Roman letter regarding sinful fallen man's lack of spiritual ability. "...they that are in the flesh *cannot* please God." To these verses I add [1Co 2:14](#), another summary conclusion that follows Paul's consistently reasoned teaching regarding fallen man's nature and sinful disposition. This verse speaks directly to sinful man's lack of ability to "receive the things of the Spirit of God."

All of these verses confront the popular notion of unsaved man's ability. If an unregenerate (not born again, not saved from sin) person possesses an inherent ability to do as much of spiritually righteous acts as a regenerate person—thus his only saved-unsaved distinctive is his motivation—these verses mean nothing at all, for they categorically address the unsaved person's lack of ability to perform acceptable spiritual actions, physical or mental.

The word translated *cannot* in [Ro 8:8](#) is a combination of two words in the Greek text of the verse. The first word is a strong negative. The second word has the following meaning:

**1** to be able, have power whether by virtue of one's own ability and resources, or of a state of mind, or through favourable circumstances, or by permission of law or custom. **2** to be able to do something. **3** to be capable, strong and powerful.<sup>45</sup>

Thus the linking of the two words emphasizes fallen man's (Paul's term "they that are in the flesh") lack of ability to please God. Interestingly the same two words appear in [1Co 2:14](#), "...*neither can*." Both of these verses reject the idea that fallen unsaved humans possess the ability to 1) please God, 2) receive the things of the Spirit of God, or 3) know such things. In combination these three passages describe unsaved humans quite clearly. They actively practice sin, and they lack the desire and the ability to pursue God and godliness—anything spiritual in the sense of things that relate to God from a truly spiritual perspective.

Isaiah focuses on the desires, motives, or will of the wicked in terms of spiritual matters.

*Let favour be shewed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the LORD. (Isa 26:10)*

The word “will” speaks to the wicked person’s conduct, but it also addresses his/her natural inclination, the will itself. Thus both fallen humanity’s will, motives, or desires, and abilities are alien to any action or attitude that can possibly please God.

What are the theological implications of this inherent lack of ability and motive? Clearly they are significant. Any view of regeneration that requires any form or degree of participation from the unregenerate person imposes an impossible task upon him. Such a view of the new birth demands that the person think or do what he/she utterly lacks both the ability and desire to do. In effect it demands the impossible, leaving us with the senseless conclusion that in the end no one could possibly gain his/her salvation; the logic of such a view of salvation leaves heaven empty and hell with a population explosion!

In a rather futile attempt to avoid the problems of this theological view some folks view the human means that they continue to insist on requiring for a person to be saved as a “means” or “instrument” and not the actual cause of salvation itself. However, this view gives no relief from the implications of these passages. Is fallen man any more capable of exercising “means” or “instrumentality” than of performing actual works to accomplish his/her personal salvation?

Paul’s view of the unregenerate person’s utter lack of ability to do anything spiritually acceptable to God explains his analogy in [Eph 2:1](#); prior to God’s saving grace and work in the unregenerate sinner, we all were “dead in trespasses and sins.” There is a world of difference between a sick person and a dead person. The sick person may suffer various degrees of deficiency, but they inherently possess life and with it certain residual abilities. The dead person has no ability and no cognizance of anything. There are no functional degrees of death. Dead is dead!

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah acknowledged this same inherent lack of desire and ability.

*Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil. (Jer 13:23)*

In the analogy there is nothing inherently wrong with the Ethiopian’s skin color any more than there is anything wrong with the leopard’s spots. Jeremiah’s point deals with ability. What the Ethiopian and the leopard are by nature they cannot change. However, when we go from the analogy to the lesson, both Jeremiah and Paul confront sinful and fallen humanity with the fact that there *is* something profoundly wrong with depraved humanity, but such a person is as wholly lacking in ability to alter his/her condition as the Ethiopian or the leopard. To tell a person whom we consider to be unregenerate that they must do something to alter their spiritual nature or state would be as futile and senseless as going to the cemetery and telling the dead in their graves that they need to do something to remedy their death—or telling the Ethiopian or the leopard that they need to think, wish, or do something to change their basic nature. It is demanding the impossible of the incapable!

There are no degrees of ability in any of these passages. There is no residual or dormant ability that needs merely to be encouraged and energized. There is no hidden talent that merely needs to be developed. The young man who approached Jesus with the preconception that he could do something to save himself—and errantly thought he had already done it all—was no doubt disappointed when Jesus reminded him that, despite all he had claimed to have done, he yet was deficient. ([Lu 18:18-30](#))

Fallen, depraved humanity as a consequence of the fall and demonstrated every moment of their lives thus lacks both the desire and the ability to do anything of a spiritual quality or nature that honors God,

much less anything that merits divine favor or salvation.

The implications are tremendous. Left to their own abilities and/or desires and will, all of fallen humanity cannot—and do not—desire any form of fellowship with God. Based on the array of Old Testament citations that Paul gives us in the passage from the third chapter of Romans, they are rather hostile to God than neutral toward Him. The remedy for man's sin problem does not therefore lie in man but in God—necessarily so.

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