

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

(LESSON SIX)

THE FREE WILL OF MAN

JOHN 1:10-13 (E.S.V.)

10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,

13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

ROMANS 9:14-18 (E.S.V.)

14 What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!

15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13 (N.L.T.)

12 Dear friends, you always followed my instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away, it is even more important. Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear.

13 For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.

What do we mean when we say that human beings have a "free will?" What do we mean when we say that man is a "free moral agent?" Perhaps the most widely accepted view of the "free will of man" both within the church and outside of it, is that free will is the ability of human beings to make choices spontaneously. That is to say that the choices we make are not conditioned or determined by any bias, inclination or disposition. There is nothing prior to the choice that affects the choice.

From a biblical perspective however, human beings in their fallen, unregenerate state are not considered as being in a state of neutrality with respect to the things of God. The Bible informs us that fallen, unregenerate human beings do in fact have a bias, an inclination and a disposition and that bias, inclination and disposition is not towards God and the things of God, but towards wickedness.

The following questions may be asked, "Does the will of a person rule the mind of the person, or does the mind control the will?" "Is the will free to do as it pleases, or is it the servant of the mind?" What is the will? The will of man is the faculty of choice. It is therefore the immediate cause of all action. Choice necessarily implies the refusal of one thing and the acceptance of another. In every act of the will preference is manifested; one thing is desired rather than another. To will is to choose, and to choose is to decide between two or more alternatives. But as we have noted earlier, there is something which *influences* the choice. There is something which *determines* the decision. The will therefore is a servant. It is not absolutely free!

Jonathan Edwards the famous American theologian and philosopher of the eighteenth century, in his book "*The Free Will of Man*," defined free will as "the mind choosing." While he made a distinction between the mind and the will, Edwards believed that the two were inseparably related.

He held that human beings do not make moral choices without the mind approving the choice. The mind is involved in the choice of the will. The will of man does not act independently of the mind of man, it acts in partnership with the mind. Whatever the mind considers to be desirable is what the will is inclined to choose. Edwards stated that free moral agents always act according to the strongest inclination they have at the moment they make a choice. In other words, we always choose according to our strongest inclination at the time of choosing. We may say then that the will is the servant of the mind.

The point is that not only may we choose according to our own strongest desires but that is exactly what we do! It is in fact what we **must** do! This in fact is the essence of free will—the ability to choose what we want most. The problem that the fallen, unregenerate sinner faces is not that he or she has lost the faculty of choice. They have a mind, they can think, they have desires and they have a will. The will of such an individual is free in the sense that it is able to do freely what the sinner desires for it to do. Where then is the problem? The problem is in the root of the desires of the heart in the unsaved individual. Because the sinful, adamic nature has not been impacted by the salvation of God unsaved individuals have an overwhelming desire and appetite for sin and so they sin. Sinners sin because they want to sin. Therefore, they sin freely! They reject Jesus Christ because they want to reject Him. They reject Him freely. Before a person can respond positively to the things of God and choose Jesus Christ, he or she must have a desire to do so.

The question is “Do fallen unregenerate human beings retain any desire for God and the things of God?” Man was in fact created with the ability to be righteous or sinful. But because of the Fall - the transgression of Adam, man no longer has the ability, in and of himself to be righteous. He still has the ability to think and to make choices but he does not have the inclination, the desire or the disposition to choose God or the things of God. Man does in fact have a free will. What he lost in the Fall was liberty. His will is in bondage to his corrupt human nature. He lost the ability to make the choices that bring him into harmony and fellowship with God which is where true freedom is found.

My brothers and sisters, whenever we sin, what that sinful thought, utterance or action indicates is that at the time of committing the sin, our desire to commit that sin is stronger than our desire to please Jesus Christ. If our desire to please Him was stronger at that moment we would not have sinned. It may seem to us that we make choices for no apparent reason. The truth is however that we always have a reason for making a specific choice. There is a reason why we are here in this meeting. And your reason for being here might be very different from mine. The great majority of us would probably say that we came to worship the Lord, or to participate in the study of God’s word but it is possible that our reason for coming was not so pure.

If by the term “free will” we mean that fallen, unregenerate man can choose what he wants, then without a doubt man can choose what he wants. If, however, we mean by the term “free will” that fallen, unregenerate human beings have the moral power to choose righteousness then the term “free will” is too lofty to apply to moral wretches.

The truth is that human beings have freedom only in one direction. They are free when they sin. This kind of freedom is like that of the free fall of the person who jumps from a plane and delays opening his or her parachute. He or she experiences virtually no restraints. The anticipated enjoyment of such an activity is like those who “*promise themselves liberty*” (**2 Peter 2:19**), yet are really wholly in bondage to gravity. They become free but “*free among the dead*,” as the Psalmist put it in (**Psalm 88:5**).

The human will is corrupted at the source. When an unregenerate person struggles against the evil propensities of his or her nature, they do so by exercising their will which is the dynamic force which lies at the root of those evil propensities. The very exercise of the will in this struggle has the effect only of making it stronger! Such a struggle is spiritually self-defeating because it serves in the end only to reinforce at the core of their being the source of the sinfulness they hate so much.

The individual who attempts to overcome evil by his or her own will is defeating their own purposes by strengthening the very will that is the seat of their evil desires. The power for evil is self-reinforced, and thus self-reformation becomes a wholly self-defeating exercise. It is a vicious circle.

Fallen human beings are not merely defective in their understanding, or blurred in their vision of the truth, or sick in the moral fibre of their being. They are hopelessly lost, blind and dead. They cannot respond to God's love merely by being told about it, any more than a corpse can respond to the appeals of a loved one. Before we can respond we must be resurrected. We cannot love God in order to be made alive. Rather we must be made alive in order to love God. The initiative must always be with God. When God resurrects an individual he or she has no choice but to respond. The dead cannot refuse resurrection any more than they can ask for it. It is Divine Election and Sovereign Grace that account for man's salvation, not human will. Yet it is human will that accounts for man's lost condition. The individual who intends to commit suicide acts according to his or her own will; but should they succeed in carrying out the act, they are certainly totally unable to undo what they have done. Indeed, they are even unable to wish it undone.

The crucial issue is this. Some persons respond and some do not. Why do some and not all respond to something so beneficial and vitally important as the eternal salvation of their own souls? Is it because they are different in some way? If so, in what way are they different? Is it in some way that makes them better judges of what is good? Or is it a natural disposition that is less hostile to the things of God? The truth is that all such distinguishing marks, if they really do exist, would be evidences that all men are *not* equal before God. They would indicate that it is *not* out of the same lump that some are made vessels of honour while others are made vessels of dishonour! But we know these things are not true. There are not any differences between human beings for in **1 Corinthians 4:7** Paul writes, "*For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?*"

It is "*of the same lump*" that both kinds of vessels are made for in **Romans 9:21** Paul writes, "*Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?*"

There are no differences in the responsiveness of the physically dead. The same is true in the case of every single one of them. Their response is wholly predictable: it is nil. The same is true of the spiritually dead. All are alike: dead and unresponsive unless first quickened by the Spirit of God. The Psalmist was aware of this fact. In **Psalms 80:17-19** we read the following: "*Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself. So will not we go back from thee: quicken us, and we will call upon thy name. Turn us again, O LORD God of hosts, cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.*"

The **New Living Translation** renders the verses as follows: "*Strengthen the man you love, the son of your choice. Then we will never abandon you again. Revive us so we can call on your name once more. Turn us again to yourself, O LORD God of Heaven's Armies. Make your face shine down upon us. Only then will we be saved.*"

It has to be God's initiative, not man's; for in **Ecclesiastes 9:5** "*the dead know not anything.*"

There are Christians who hold the view that what distinguishes the saved person from the unsaved person is that the saved person yields to the conviction of the Holy Spirit while the unsaved person resists. But if this were the case then the saved person would have ground for boasting and self-glorying over his or her cooperation with the Holy Spirit. This would flatly contradict **Ephesians 2:1-9**:

1 *And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;*

2 *Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:*

3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

4 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,

5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)

6 And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:

7 That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.

8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Fallen men and women do not will to be saved of themselves. Their salvation is the result of God graciously converting their will. In other words, they are made willing by the grace of God. We know that it is possible for a person's mind to be changed by the demonstration of a truth without destroying the mind's power of independent thought. In the same way God can change a person's will by gracious intervention without destroying the independent expression of the will. Demonstration is to the mind what persuasion is to the will. Neither is destroyed by the change which may be brought about in each case.

Human beings do have the power to exercise their will. It is only that the will of the unsaved person is corrupted to such an extent that it is by nature in opposition to the will of God. Because we are conscious of making a choice, we suppose that our choices are free. What we discover by experience is that we are truly free only when we sin, for we are then acting according to our nature, a fact which accounts for the pleasures of sin (**Hebrews 11:25**).

Some person may object to this and point out that **Revelation 22:17** says, "*And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.*" They will vehemently state that this verse indicates that "Whosoever will may come." The verse does indeed indicate this, but does this signify that everybody has the will **to** come? "Whosoever will may come" no more implies that unsaved persons have the ability, in and of themselves **to** come, than "*Stretch forth thine hand*" (**Matthew 12:13**), implied that the man with the withered arm had the ability, in and of himself to comply with the request of Jesus. When our Lord stood by the cave where Lazarus was buried and commanded him to "*come forth*" (**John 11:43**), did Lazarus have the ability in and of himself to obey?

In and of themselves the unsaved person or the "natural man" has the power to reject Jesus Christ, but he or she does not have the power in and of themselves to receive Jesus Christ. Why is this so? **Romans 8:5-9** furnishes the answer: "*For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.*"

Human beings choose that which is according to their nature, and therefore before they will ever choose or prefer that which is Divine and spiritual a new nature must be imparted to them; in other words, they **must** be born again. Because the will is governed by the mind and because these have been corrupted by sin, then it follows that if ever a fallen human being is to turn or move in the direction of God, God Himself must work in him or her "**both to will and to do of His good pleasure**" (**Philippians 2:13**). The "freedom" that human beings boast of is in truth "*the bondage of corruption*" (**Romans 8:21**).