

How can man be held responsible if he can't choose to believe?**9:19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"**

The words "you will say to me" are Paul's diatribe style—a style of writing that asks hypothetical questions of an imaginary opponent and then answers them. The objector in Paul's mind has questions about the concept of absolute sovereignty which seems to remove human responsibility. If *God* hardens people, then people can't help but disobey since no one can resist God. If that is true, then how can God blame them for their disobedience? On what basis could God judge man if he has no choice but to do what God has determined he will do? (i.e. "Why does He still find fault?")

This would not be an issue if Paul had simply said that God knew who would *choose* to believe, or that God's choice was based on *man's faith*. The fact that Paul offers such a formidable question confirms that he didn't believe that men have the power to choose God, but that God chooses men.

Paul never tries to relieve the tension between human will and God's sovereignty. He has affirmed that God is sovereign, but he will go on to show that he believes that men are responsible for their own willful failure (Ro. 9:30–10:21). He is willing to hold both teachings as true.

In response to the accusation that God cannot blame us for sin if He is the cause of our actions, Paul first rebukes the spirit of the question (vs. 20–21).

9:20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?**9:21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?**

"On the contrary," that is, in contrast to the objection expressed in verse 19, Paul asks, "What right does anyone have to question God?"

Often in scripture biblical writers respond to the feeling behind the question rather than answer the question directly. The objection that God is unjust for judging people whom He hardens is only more evidence of the gross sinfulness of man in his irreverence of God. The accusation against God "supposes that He is under obligation to extend His grace to all. Whereas, He is under obligation to none. All are sinners, and have forfeited every claim to His mercy. It is therefore, the prerogative of God to spare one and not the other" (Hodge, 318). Just as a potter has the sovereign right over the clay, it is God's right to do what He wants with what is His. Is there anything more absurd than the clay complaining about its shape to its Creator (cf. Isa. 29:16; Jer. 18:6)?

In the verses that follow, Paul builds upon the imagery of the potter to reinforce his point in verse 20.

Paul is not denying human responsibility. The whole Bible says we are responsible for our sins. In Romans 1 Paul had already said that men suppress knowledge of God and God gives them over to their desires, etc. God's sovereignty never mitigates human responsibility.

Many today struggle with Paul's logic because they hold a different view than the biblical view of human freedom. They believe that for humans to be held morally accountable they need the absolute freedom to choose between good and evil (this is known as the libertarian view); but Paul does not assume that

human freedom is the absolute freedom to choose. If there was absolute freedom, then God would be dependent upon us and our decisions. Thus, a view of human freedom known as compatibilism seems to be more in accord to what they read in scripture (see note 1 below).

According to the Bible, God is absolutely sovereign, but His sovereignty never reduces human responsibility. Human beings, made in the image of God, are morally responsible creatures, but our responsibility never makes God contingent (reactionary—God is never in a position where He must react to what we do).

NOTES

1) Free Will in the Bible

Free will is normally conceived of as an equal ability or power to accept or reject something. In relation to the gospel, it is the belief that man, within his own nature, is as able to believe as to disbelieve. However, this is not the way the Bible describes free will; rather, in the Bible “a person’s freedom consists in the ability to act according to one’s desires and inclinations without being compelled to do otherwise by something or someone external to himself. So long as one’s choice is the voluntary fruit of one’s desire, the will is free. . . A man’s will is the extension and invariable expression of his nature. As he is, so he wills” (Storms).

The nature of man is described in the Bible as being totally depraved. “The term depravity refers to the moral disposition or inclination of fallen man’s nature toward evil and against good. This principle of sin and moral pollution is such that man is by nature opposed to what is true and righteous. The inclination of his heart, the delight of his soul, the orientation of his will is toward wickedness. Nothing compels him to sin. He sins because he loves it. He revels in it. He has no taste for God, but relishes evil and pursues it with voluntary zeal” (Sam Storms).

Thus, man does not have free will in the sense that it is commonly used. People have freedom to choose but they can only choose in accordance with what they are by nature. Because humans are fallen they will never choose God unless God intervenes. This does not mean that a person cannot exercise his or her will when they hear the gospel. It means that when they do exercise their will, apart from the grace of God opening our eyes, they will always reject it.

Simply to say that the sinner “cannot” receive Christ is misleading. In many senses he can, and should: he is physically and mentally able; he is not forced to remain a sinner contrary to his desires. The sinner’s inability is moral and spiritual. Sinners need more than choices to be saved; they need a new nature that makes them desire Christ. This nature only comes through the working of the Holy Spirit. In John 3, Jesus said we need to be born from above; we need more than a nature born of flesh, we need a nature born of the Spirit.

If we have difficulty here, it may be because we fail to understand the nature of the sinner’s bondage. It is a moral and spiritual bondage, not a metaphysical, physical or psychological bondage. If, as in my robot-machine illustration, someone is physically forced to do something

he doesn't want to do, then of course his bondage removes his responsibility for the act. Confronted with his "deed," the person would have a valid excuse: "I couldn't help it; I was physically forced to do it." But imagine someone coming before a human judge and saying, to excuse himself of a crime, "I couldn't help it, your honor; I was forced to do it by my nature. Since birth I've just been a rotten guy!" Surely there is something ironic about appealing to depravity to excuse depraved acts! If our defendant really is a "rotten guy," then, far from being an excuse, that is all the more reason to lock him up! My point, then, is that although physical (and some other kinds of) bondage can furnish valid excuses for otherwise bad actions, moral bondage is not such an excuse. I can't imagine anyone disputing that proposition once they understand it. (Frame; <https://frame-poythress.org/free-will-and-moral-responsibility/>)

Two Views on Human Freedom: Libertarianism and Compatibilism

(The following is edited from a paper by John Hendryx—an unedited version can be read at <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/libertarian.html>).

Libertarianism holds to two basic notions. First, it is adamant that our choices cannot be determined by anything outside of ourselves. No outside influences of any kind have sufficient power to cause us to make one choice or another. This means that God Himself cannot interfere with any choice we make; otherwise we can be neither free nor responsible in making those choices.

The second fundamental tenet of libertarianism is known as the freedom of contrary choice. This simply means that no matter what choice one makes, in order to be truly free, an alternative choice must be a genuine possibility and able to be made with equal ease. So for example, in order for a person to exercise a free and meaningful choice to believe upon Christ for salvation, he must be able equally to choose not to believe.

A Biblically framed **compatibilism** holds that free and responsible choices are compatible with a God who also sovereignly determines what we will or will not choose. In other words, there is a dual explanation for every choice we make. God is the primary yet remote cause of our choosing while we humans are the secondary yet proximate cause of our choosing.

The Three Compatibilist Mechanics of Human Choosing

First, we always choose what we want to choose. We always choose that which we perceive to be in our best interest at the moment of choosing. Even people who choose suicide are deluded in thinking at that tragic moment that self-inflicted death is the best choice for them.

Secondly, compatibilism says that all of our choices are determined by whatever our motives and desires are. Now there are many conditions, external and internal to ourselves, that can influence our motives and desires, but when all is said and done we never act against those motives—in particular, the strongest ones. If a contrary choice presents itself, it will always have its own particular compelling reasons. Humans don't do random.

But there is a **third** very crucial component here. And in this case, we are particularly concerned about our moral and spiritual choices. This is what the Bible is primarily concerned about and so this is where we must pay closest attention. What is it that motivates us to make moral and spiritual choices? Where do the motives for these choices come from? They proceed from our fundamental nature as human beings. In this regard, when the Bible uses the word “heart” it often has reference to our fundamental moral and spiritual disposition as human beings. Solomon says, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23). The heart here represents our core nature. It is our mission control central; and from the heart flow the course of decisions that we make about life.

But what is the condition of our heart? The Apostle Paul tells us that we have inherited a sin nature from Adam (Rom. 5:12–19). This means a fundamentally corrupted heart. Consider what the Bible says here: “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). Paul instructs the Ephesian believers to “walk no longer just as the Gentiles [unbelievers] also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (Eph. 4:17). Notice not only is the heart hardened here wherein our basic affections and desires lie; but our core nature includes our minds that operate in futility, emptiness, and uselessness in regard to spiritual things. This is the default mode of every human being who lives apart from the holy well-springs of the life of God.

Paul puts this another way when he says: “The mind set on the flesh [sinful nature] is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7). The sin nature is hostile toward God and the things of God. It does not want to obey God’s moral imperatives in a way that brings him glory alone (Rom. 3:23). Thus we cannot please God in our natural sinful state. In fact, Paul says we are not even able to do so. As sinners infected by the curse of Adam we are unwilling and unable to do anything that pleases and glorifies God. All of our best attempts at goodness are like filthy rags (Isa. 64:6), tainted by every dark hue of sin our hearts can devise.

Furthermore, there is nothing we can do to alter our desperate condition. The prophet says, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jer. 13:23 NIV). Jesus says the same thing employing some other color metaphors:

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. (Matt. 12:33–35)

Jesus uses the idea of a tree to represent the basic nature of human beings. There are either good trees or bad trees. There are either trees that are poisonous and produce poisonous fruit or there are good trees that produce good, nutritious fruit. In order for a tree to produce good fruit it must be made good. It must undergo a radical transformation. The heart is either full of good treasure or evil treasure. Jesus is summarizing what a Biblically oriented compatibilist view of the human will tells us. If you have a

corrupted nature then you will only have corrupted desires and motives which produce corrupted choices.

So the question of crucial importance here is this: what must happen in order for the tree to be made good?

We have a need for regenerated natures. In Ephesians 2, Paul describes very graphically the transformation that takes place in the sinner who is changed into a Christ follower. He begins by depicting the pre-Christian state of his readers.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. (Eph. 2:1–3)

The unregenerate are dead in trespasses and sins. Spiritual silence—stone cold death. They are dominated by the dark designs of the flesh—the sin nature we inherited from Adam and in which we freely and gladly indulged. Yes, Satan, the prince of the power of the air, has a powerful grip upon sinners, but every sinner willingly (freely we might add) follows after the devil's sinister plots of provoking humans unto disobedience to the moral will of God.

With this framework of human depravity in mind, consider the following question. Could any person repent of their sin and believe upon Christ while being enslaved to this condition?

Remember our basic thesis about the mechanics of choosing. We always choose what we want to choose, and what we want to choose is what we believe to be in our best interest. Furthermore, the moral and spiritual actions we want to choose are rooted in our most compelling desires and motives. But these are inextricably tied to our basic spiritual nature. If we have a spiritually dead, intractable corrupted nature, then we will only have corrupted motives that produce corrupted choices. In order to make good, God pleasing, God glorifying moral and spiritual choices we must have a new nature implanted within us. As God tells Israel through the prophet Ezekiel:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. (Ezek. 36:25-27)

God does this out the grace that flows from his own sovereign freedom. To be sure, we repent of our sin and trust Christ as an act of our own choice, freely and willingly. But we would never do so unless a change in our natures took place. That is something we cannot do. We are wholly passive as God replaces our heart of stone with a soft, pliable, pure, good heart that then suddenly develops desires for salvation it never had before. Our renewed heart then actively chooses salvation in response to those new desires; free of divine coercion, unhindered in any way, made completely voluntarily and yet in full concert with a sovereign God who made his choice first.

And this returns us to our compatibilistic equation. God is the primary cause of our actions, no less in the normal routines of life, but particularly as it concerns our spiritual transformation. But this does not somehow dismantle our responsible and freely made choices. Divine sovereignty is never to be equated to fatalism—a distinctly pagan notion. We are not lifeless marionettes dangling from the Master Puppeteer’s strings. We are responsible creatures who participate in his story in a necessary nexus of cause and effect. Regeneration is the supernatural side of the coin that initiates the work of salvation—the cause. Conversion is the effect—the natural and human side of the coin whereby we respond in faith and repentance to the effectual calling of the Spirit (John 6:44; 2 Tim. 1:9). Thus, the saving grace inherent in regeneration must precede faith.

In regeneration our wills are passive. In conversion they are active. Put another way, regeneration is the primary cause of our coming to Christ. Conversion is the secondary cause. God’s work of transforming our natures and infusing them with new life is largely silent and imperceptible, whereas our response in conversion is obviously tangible and self-conscious. The priority of regeneration is the only way to make sense of the gracious nature of salvation. It is the only way that prevents us from boasting and taking credit where no credit is due (1 Cor. 1:26–31). The honor and the praise are reserved for God alone.

In addition to Hendryx, John Frame says, “Scripture contradicts libertarianism, by ascribing divine causes to human decisions (Exod. 34:24, Is. 44:28, Dan. 1:9, John 19:24, Acts 13:48, 16:14), even sinful ones (Gen. 45:5–8, Ps. 105:24, Luke 22:22, Acts 2:23–24, 3:18, 4:27–28, Rom. 9:17). In none of these (or many other) cases does divine causation eliminate human responsibility. In fact, these texts often mention human responsibility in the same context. Scripture also contradicts libertarianism by teaching that human decisions are governed by the heart (Luke 6:45), and by teaching that the human heart itself is under God’s control (Ps. 33:15, Prov. 21:1).” (<https://frame-poythress.org/determinism-chance-and-freedom/>)

Frame also points out that if we can do things that have no reason for doing them, then “libertarianism, rather than guaranteeing moral responsibility, actually destroys it. How can we be held responsible for decisions, if those decisions are “psychological accidents,” unconnected with any of our desires? Indeed, such a situation would, precisely, negate all responsibility. Certainly it is difficult to imagine being held responsible for something we really didn’t want to do.” (<https://frame-poythress.org/free-will-and-moral-responsibility/>)