

UNDERSTANDING MAN, Part 7 2-26-17 *Free Will*

Today we wrap up our study of the doctrine of man - a series I've entitled *Understanding Man*. After I began this it was suggested to me that somewhere in this series I address the topic of the free will of man and propose an answer to the question, "Does man have free will?" Of course, I didn't **have to** teach on that subject. It was up to me. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to do so. So, my message today is titled, "Are we free to be Calvinists or predestined to be Arminians?" Not really, in fact, the predestination issue is not my real focus today. Instead we finish our study of man by considering the will of man.

Does man have a free will? My profound answer is, "that depends." It depends on what you mean by "free will." People tend to be very sloppy in their use of language. They throw around vague words and phrases without ever defining them and this often leads to confusion and misunderstanding. For instance, the term "legalism" is bandied about in Christian circles but I hear it used to mean a number of different things. (1) It could refer to a view that says one is saved, or made right with God, by legal obedience. Some call that "legalism." (2) Secondly, the term is used to refer to an excessive devotion to man-made rules of conduct. (3) Thirdly, I have heard the term "legalism" used to denote a theology which emphasized the importance of obedience to God's word. Now, when you call me a legalist I need to know what you mean. You must define your term and so must we define the term "free will" or else we will just go around in mental circles.

There are all kinds of freedoms that one can have. You may be free from A and not free from B. So, when I ask, "Are you free?" I must specify what I have in mind. Let's do that regarding the will. First then, realize there are certain ways that you are obviously not free. For instance, you are not free from personal inabilities. A penguin is not free to fly south for the winter. You are not free to lift a two ton truck. Surely we would agree that, in that sense at least, the will is not free.

In a different sense, I hope we can agree that the will is obviously free. When you came to church this morning you chose to sit right where you are. If you were late your options were limited but still you chose. I don't suppose there is any way I could convince you otherwise. Indeed, if I tried, some of you may freely choose to get up and leave. It is evident to me that **I** make certain choices and no one and nothing forces me to choose a certain way. In fact, it's impossible to be forced to choose something. You may be strongly persuaded if I hold a gun at your head to do what I say - but still you have chosen; you had and have free will. What's more, there is no other

kind of will than a free will. When you forcefully grab my hands and clap them together my will was not un-free in that instance; that was not a matter of my will at all. But, when I go to Brusters for ice-cream, I'm fully aware and fully believe that I am free to choose any of their various flavors. Now, stop and think. What do I mean by the word "free" at that point? What I mean and what you normally mean by the word "free" is that there are no outward, external constraints forcing me to act in a certain way. An external constraint would be something more powerful than me that restricts me. We say a prisoner is not free, i.e. he is constrained or restrained by walls and bars stronger than he is. But, there were no such constraints on you this morning. So, I can say that you came to church thru your own free will. It wasn't my will or anyone else's. That is, there were no external constraints forcing a decision. In that sense your will is free, free from external constraint.

So, does man have free will? Yes, of course. In a sense. But there is another sense in which his will is bound. This is very important so follow closely. I think you believe, as I do, that everything acts according to its nature - right? Birds, lions, people, and even God do what they do because of what they are. They act according to their nature. This is **always** true. Suppose you have a lion in a cage and you put out some hay for the lion to eat. Is the lion free to eat it? You say, "well yes, but." But what? But he won't eat it because he's a lion and lions are carnivorous beasts. What have you just said? You have said that his will is free from external constraints but not free from his own lion nature. His lion nature means that he does not even think of hay as food; and you can bet on it - the lion won't eat the hay.

Another question: why do some birds fly south for the winter? Huh, what's the answer? Because it's too far to walk. Of course. But it's also the nature of migratory birds to fly south in winter. Does the bird have free will? Yes and no, you see. Think of three birds who all live in Detroit - one flies south for the winter; another foolish, non-migratory bird stays in Detroit all winter long; but a third bird is hooked to a chain in a Detroit pet store. The third bird is in Detroit due to an external constraint. The other two are where they are, free from the chain, but bound to their peculiar nature as birds. We are like those birds - bound to act according to **our** nature. This is true of Christians and of non-Christians. It is even true of God. Does God have a free will? Now you would probably agree that if anyone has free will it is God. Answer me this: Can God lie? Is He free to lie? Paul in Titus 1 says God cannot lie. Why not? Because lying is inconsistent with His perfect nature. Nobody, no being, is free in the sense that it/he/she can act contrary to what it/he/she is. Are you with me? We are bound to act a certain way, not by external but by internal constraints.

When I go to Brusters no one forces me to pick any certain flavor but I can assure you I will never pick coconut because I am wholly inclined against coconut. I will opt for the coffee chocolate chip or something like that every time. I choose in accordance with my constitution.

Our conclusion then is this: that although man's will is free with respect to external constraints and, therefore, is never forced, it is not free with respect to internal constraints but is indeed controlled by the **nature** of the chooser. In our study in the word today I want you to see what this truth about free will says about natural man, about conversion and then, about the Christian.

First then, the natural man, and when I use that term today I am referring to non-Christian or pre-Christian man as he is in himself, apart from any saving spiritual grace. What can we say about the natural man and his free will? His will is bound to act in accord with his nature and as we learned last week his nature is inherently sinful and corrupt. This means several significant things. Romans 8:5a *For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh.* Speaking here of the non-Christian 5-8 *For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.* Now twice in these four verses Paul says there is something the non-Christian cannot do. Verse 7 says he cannot subject his mind to God's law and verse 8 says he cannot please God. Now, it is important for us, as Christians, to ask, "Is the unregenerate man, the natural man, in and of himself, able to receive Jesus Christ, turn from sin and trust in Him?" Certainly it pleases God for men to do that but 8 *those who are in the flesh cannot please God.* It is not possible for someone devoid of the Holy Spirit to do so. Why not? 7a *because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God.* There is no way that a sinner will choose to love God because God is repulsive to him; God turns him off like coconut turns me off. The unconverted man has no taste for God. He can no more trust in Christ than a lion can eat hay.

I Corinthians 2:14 *But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.* Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells the story of two of England's greatest leaders: William Wilberforce and William Pitt. Wilberforce led the movement to abolish slavery. Pitt was the one-time prime minister. Both were brilliant men but Wilberforce was truly converted while Pitt was but a

Christian by name. Now Wilberforce loved his friend and was concerned for his soul so that he prevailed on Pitt to go with him to hear the great preacher Richard Cecil. So they went and heard Mr. Cecil at his best, preaching in his most spiritual and elevated manner. Wilberforce loved it and felt lifted right up into heaven. He could not imagine anything better, more enjoyable and wonderful. But before the two ever left the building William Pitt turned and said, "You know, Wilberforce, I have not the slightest idea what that man was talking about." And he really hadn't. As a man can be tone deaf to music, all who are not Christians are tone deaf to the spiritual. Lloyd Jones says: *That which was ravishing the heart and mind of Wilberforce conveyed nothing to Pitt. He was bored, he could not follow it, he could not understand it; he did not know what it was about. A man of great brilliance, a man of great culture, a man of great intellectual ability, but all that does not help.* I Corinthians 2:14 *But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.* In fact, John 3:3 *Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.* Not only can he not enter the kingdom he can't even see it. When a lion looks at hay he sees no food. Just so, when a sinner looks at Christ he sees no Savior and no Lord.

Look also at John 6:44ab *No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.* 64,65 *But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. 65 And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.* Jesus here, very clearly states that, before the Spirit works on the heart, man cannot come to Him. And why not? As we have seen they **cannot** because they **will** not. It is impossible that you will come to Christ when you are hostile to Him. How can you choose Him when you don't want Him? Don't be confused here. Someone might well say, "You say a natural man cannot please God, cannot come to Christ, so even if I wanted to I couldn't come." Oh no. I didn't say that. I say exactly the opposite. If you want to come to Christ nothing could keep you from Him. But if you want Christ you are no longer a natural man but a spiritual man.

So, we see that natural fallen man will never choose Christ because he is hostile to God: He freely chooses to sin for he is a sinner. Clear enough. But it is also clear enough that people do come to Christ, do choose to please God. They are converted. But how? And what role does human will play in conversion? Two verses speak directly to that issue. John 1:13 speaks of those who

believe in Christ **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:**16** *So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.* In both cases it is clear that what leads to salvation is not a choice of human will but of divine will. If our salvation depended on the will of humans hostile to God how many would be saved? Nada. Remember Romans 3:11 says that no one seeks for God. But let's see what insights John 6 gives us on the dynamics of conversion. **6:65** *And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.* Here we see that to some God gives the ability to come. **44ab** *No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.* This time Jesus speaks of an active work, not of man, but of God. God is the drawer, man is the drawee. So again, we see that God is the Savior. God brings about conversion. And He does this how? Not by forcing man. The human will is not violated in this. We are not pushed, we are **drawn**. This speaks of an inner constraint. God elsewhere refers to it as a "calling." He speaks to the heart and says, "come" and what does this called one do? **6:37** *All that the Father gives Me **will** come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.* Jesus speaks of those whom the Father gave Him and these He says, with certainty, will come. No doubt about it. How does He know? Because their coming is due to God's work - His mighty drawing.

Look now at John 15:**16** *You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain,* **16ab** *You did not choose Me but I chose you.* Now wait a second. Is He saying that his disciples had no choice whether to follow or not? Not exactly. It seems evident that what the disciples did they did freely. But Christ is pointing to something behind and before their decision. He says it was His choice of them that made the radical difference. His choice of them preceded and made possible their choice of Him. You see, we have said that naturally men are turned off by Christ and will never in and of themselves follow Him. They have no taste for holiness like I have no taste for celery. I don't like celery and a million eloquent sermons on the great taste of celery will never change my mind. Only one thing will change my view of celery - a change of me. And only one thing will cause a sinner to love His Lord and that is a change of that sinner! If a man with a totally depraved heart embraces God's word and will you can be sure that man has been given a new and pure heart. So that just as he was naturally and irresistibly pulled away from Christ before, now he will be naturally and irresistibly drawn to Christ.

For example look at Acts.16:**13** *On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled.* Here Paul preaches the gospel to a group of women. They all hear the same thing right? **14** *A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.* Did Lydia respond? Yes. Did Lydia believe? Yes. Lydia did it, but why? **14c** *the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.* This is what we call being born-again. We were blinded to the truth, opposed to it. But God works to open our hearts, to make us spiritually alive. Again, it is God's will, not ours, that leads to salvation.

One thing most Christians don't take seriously is the Scriptural description of sinful man as being dead spiritually. Ephesians 2:**1** *you were dead in your trespasses and sins.* Now what can a dead man do? You say, well, if the dead man will come to Jesus God will make him alive. Great! Go ahead and shout and scream to that dead man - what will happen? Nothing! Dead men don't respond. Lydia responded, maybe you responded, why? God made you alive! Ephesians 2:**1** *you were dead in your trespasses and sins.* **4-5** *But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) **8-10a** by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.* Now, you do choose - I'll grant you that - but did you choose to come alive spiritually? No, no, no. Dead men don't choose. Think of the story of Lazarus, who died in John 11. Once he was dead, did he pray for Jesus to come raise him up? Did he call Jesus? No, but Jesus came and said, "*Lazarus, come forth.*" How many of you believe dead Lazarus could say to the Son of God, "*No thank you Jesus, I'd rather remain dead.*"? Did the will of Lazarus have anything to do with his resurrection? Of course not, and the same is true spiritually. When God calls you by the gospel you freely come because God has changed you and now you see Christ as the fairest of 10,000. Praise the Lord for His mighty gracious work. Psalm 110:**3a** *Your people will volunteer **freely** in the day of Your power* and it is the life-changing power of God that makes it so. John 1:13 said we are *born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God.*

Alright, we have seen how the human will operates in natural man and then in conversion. We finish by seeing how the will operates in the Christian. Get back to where we started. Romans 8:**7-9** *the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.* If you truly love and trust in Jesus, if you belong to Him, you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. You are radically different from the non-Christian. Well, does the Christian have free will? Again I say yes and no. He is just like the non-Christian and just like God. He has no outward constraints, but he is bound to act according to his nature. The difference between the Christian and the unbeliever is not that one has free will and the other doesn't. The difference is that the heart of the Christian is inclined in a different direction. Romans 6 says we are all slaves - but there is a great difference. 6:**16b-18** *You are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that though you **were** slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and having been freed from sin, you became **slaves** of righteousness.*

Now, Christian, I want you to see something very important here which is affirmed in Romans 8:**12** *We are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.* You see, he says, you don't have to live carnally. You can walk in the Spirit. Romans 6:**14a** *For sin shall not be master over you.* Sometimes I think we forget this. We just assume that we have to sin. I mean at least some right? Didn't Jesus tell the adulterous woman - "Your sins are forgiven, go and sin **less**?" That wasn't it was it? What did He say? He said, "Go and sin no more." Understand Romans 8:**2** *The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.* So often Christians talk as if they are the victims of their own sin, as if they just could not help what they did. The fact is that you are not the victim of your sin, you are the doer. But we like this passive language that says, "*Oh, that sin is just defeating me.*" It makes you look like a poor innocent weak thing - but realize this - the devil does not make you sin. You are free from him. When you sin it is because you chose to sin. Your problem is not that you are defeated but you are disobedient. Don't shift the blame. Own up to it. Confess it, but do something else. Romans 6:**12** *Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts.* There is no reason Christian. You have a new heart - don't follow after fleshly things **13** *Do not go on presenting the*

members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead. Praise God, He has made us alive who **were** dead. Yes, we have enemies who will oppose us. Yes, we are still awaiting the perfection of our weak, mortal bodies. Yes, there is a struggle in this life. But there is no power greater than the power that resides within a man or woman who is attached to and committed to Jesus Christ. No longer may we say, “There’s nothing I can do. That’s just the way I am. I can’t. I must. If only.” Paul says that, in Christ, we are super-conquerors. Imagine that! Believe that! Shout at the devil, “You no longer have dominion over me!” And boldly give up your victimhood to wrap yourself in the power of your Lord, to serve Him freely and serve Him boldly. *For we are **His** workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which **God** prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.* So, then, with grateful hearts, glorifying God, let us walk! Please stand for prayer.....