

## Our Free Will

Last week, we considered the Biblical truth that human beings are more than physical creatures. God has given us not only five senses to perceive the physical world, but also a spiritual capacity, a conscience and moral awareness. In that spiritual capacity we can know Him and respond to His truth. This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God.

Yet, there is a longstanding theological view rising in popularity today which contradicts this. It teaches that God predetermines every human choice and behavior, making some to be His children while leaving others incapable of responding to Him. According to this view, those who live in sin do so because they were created that way and simply cannot do otherwise. But the Bible paints a different picture that shows we are morally responsible because we are morally capable. We are free to choose which path we follow.

### 1. Moral responsibility -

Why is the teaching of free will so important? The whole sense of moral responsibility rests on free will.

Jas 1:13-15 Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:

14 But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.

15 Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

We say *free will* because our choices are made free of and independent of any compulsion. We cannot use the excuses:

God made me this way and that compelled me.

God made the world this way and that compelled me.

God allowed Satan to tempt me  
and that compelled me.

God let me grow up this way and  
that compelled me.

Consider the animated movie *Inside Out* which came out in 2015. Many might have thought it was clever and touching. It personified emotions like Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust as little characters in a control room, steering a young girl through life. Now, I understand the goal. It was to help children process emotions. But here's the problem: the girl isn't portrayed as making choices about her emotions – her emotions were making the choices for her. She wasn't driving the ship; she was just a passenger. That may be an imaginative device for storytelling, but it sends a troubling message: that we aren't responsible for our decisions because our emotions are in control. You would think that afterwards there might have been some second thoughts about the theme. After about 10 years, there was no indication of that since they followed the same girl who became a teenager in *Inside Out 2* and elevates emotional complexity but sidelines free will and moral agency. Now a teenager, the girl is still a passive vessel steered by emotions. For a Biblical worldview that affirms conscience, responsibility, and the call to choose righteousness, this framework is unbiblical and woefully inadequate.

That is exactly the opposite of what Scripture teaches. Emotions are real and powerful, but they are not sovereign. God has given us a will—a conscience, a mind, and the ability to choose between right and wrong. When someone loses control in anger, commits adultery, or abandons responsibility, they often say, "I just couldn't help it." But that's a lie our culture encourages. James says we are tempted when we are drawn away of our own lust and enticed. We are not governed by joy or sadness, we are accountable for our choices, regardless of what we feel.

A powerful contrast to this idea is found in the story of Joseph in Genesis 39. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce

him day after day, Joseph was a young man with normal human emotions. He might have been influenced by fear and could have felt alone in Egypt. But he didn't let those feelings control him.

Gen 39:7-9 And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me.

8 But he refused, and said unto his master's wife, Behold, my master wotteth not what *is* with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand;

9 *There is* none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou *art* his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?

Joseph understood that his emotions were not the deciding factor. His will, under the authority of God, was. He chose righteousness over impulse. He didn't say, "I couldn't help it," or "It just happened." He knew he was responsible for his choice.

That's what the Bible teaches. We are not puppets of emotion or products of our environment. We are accountable beings. Cain provides the opposite example of Joseph. He allowed his emotions and impulses rule.

Gen 4:6-7 And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?

7 If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee *shall be* his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

God told Cain he had a choice. His feelings were real, but they didn't have to rule him. Tragically, Cain let anger take control and killed his brother out of jealousy. But the message is the same:

God holds us accountable because we are capable of choosing, even against the strongest emotions.

## 2. Rules and regulations are insufficient

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As well meaning as they can possibly be, society is at a loss to deal with sin by themselves without God. Lawyers try to get capital crimes reduced to acts of passion. People are not held responsible for destroying families because they were driving *under the influence* of alcohol. The media tries to make perversity look natural. It has been said that man is the only creature that can blush. But there is no end to the effort to sear our conscience and feel no guilt..over anything!

The government is supposed to be there to enforce the law against those who by their will freely choose to do wrong. Government is increasingly seen as a *regulating* agency rather than holding people morally accountable. We think of government as some impersonal force, as though it is some impartial agent holding people to some standard of technical excellence, guaranteeing our safety and security against people who are decidedly not working in our best interest. Instead, it is made up of people and as such is subject to bias and the influence of special interests.

One of the ways government deals with the sin problem is through regulation. Administrations are always faced with the problem of how much regulation there should be. Regulations can deal with behavior but they don't really deal with a *moral* standard.

In 1950 less than 5% of US workers were required to have a license from a state government to perform their jobs legally. By 2008, it was 29%. <sup>1</sup> Even with licensing reform, it is only down to 20% today. According to occupational licensing laws, there have been real instances in America where people could not legally work without jumping through elaborate hoops—even for simple, non-hazardous tasks. At one point:

- You couldn't suggest paint colors in Florida without six years of training.
- You couldn't legally sell a casket in Oklahoma without a mortuary science degree and a year-long apprenticeship.
- Hair braiding in Nebraska required a full cosmetology license.
- Florists in Louisiana had to pass a state licensing exam – possibly the only state to ever require one.
- You couldn't help someone find a book in a library in Arizona if you weren't licensed.
- In Savannah, Georgia, you almost couldn't show someone around town without passing an elaborate test on history, obtaining medical certification, and paying fees.

In some of these particular cases, the laws have been repealed, but this reveals how difficult this issue is. Regulation cannot be a substitute for character. Instead of holding people morally accountable, we burden them with paperwork and technical qualifications. But God doesn't require a license to do what is right, He requires a heart submitted to truth.

Capital punishment is viewed as old fashioned because it doesn't meet some standard of pragmatism. One of the common arguments is that capital punishment doesn't deter crime. The purpose of capital punishment is not to regulate behavior, but to bring justice, to hold someone morally accountable for their sin. Deterring crime might be a side benefit, and you can be sure that with capital punishment the crimes committed by a murderer will not be committed by him again.

Instead of trying to escape the condemnation of the law by focusing on regulation, we need to see that the focus of the law is justice, not regulation. The whole foundation and purpose of the system of jurisprudence is the presupposition that man is a free moral agent who can be held accountable for his acts committed of his own free will.

Rom 13:1-5 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers.

For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same:

4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: **[this is capital punishment]** for he is the minister of God, a revenger to *execute* wrath upon him that doeth evil.

5 Wherefore *ye* must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.

We are not to obey simply out of fear of wrath, but because of our conscience. We should not be sorry just because we are caught and will face consequences, but for what we did and how we chose to sin.

Isn't this the problem Jesus had with the Pharisees? The Pharisees were focused on behaviors while Jesus sought to hold men accountable for their free will.

Matt 5:27-28 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery:  
28 But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

Matt 23:23-25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier *matters* of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

24 Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.  
25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.

The role that free will plays is immensely important. There is a law/sin relationship, not a law/behavior relationship. The government has programs to try to help mental health, but the most it can do is regulate behavior. The government does not have the ability to regulate the heart.

3. By a free will we are free to choose God

We will be judged by our free choice to surrender to God.

Deu 30:19 I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, *that* I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live:

Josh 24:15 And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that *were* on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

Isa 55:6,7 Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near:

7 Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Passages like this are strewn all through the Bible. God emphasizes that is our choice to make, blessing or

cursing.

We actually are forced to choose "yes" or "no" to God. There are many people who think that they don't have to choose. They choose to not choose. There is no option for that. To choose not to choose is to choose "no." We are already on a path to condemnation for being a sinner by default. To choose not to choose means that you remain on that path. You can choose to *change* your path but you cannot choose to not travel on the path because the clock does not stop, it keeps forcing you on. At some point the path you are on ends abruptly without warning and drops you off to your eternal destiny. You cannot choose to travel back in time on the path you did not choose to leave for the path to God.

John 3:36 He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

If you have chosen the path to God, you did so voluntarily. When it comes to living for God, you have free will to serve God. You are not forced to be baptized, join the church, or tithe. Is it because these things don't matter? Of course they do, if you want to be an obedient Christian. They are extremely important. It's just that these things must be done *by our free will*. No one will be coerced by manipulation or browbeating to serve God. That doesn't mean that we won't preach with straightforward conviction. I'll give you the best reasons I can think of for serving God, but you are the one who has to make that choice to do so.

God created [beings] which had free will. That means creatures which can go wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong, but I can't. If a thing is free to be good it's also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible.



Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of [robots] - of creatures that worked like machines - would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in [love]...for that they've got to be free.

Of course God knew what would happen if they used their freedom the wrong way: apparently, He thought it worth the risk. (...) If God thinks this state of war in the universe a price worth paying for free will – that is, for making a real world in which creatures can do real good or harm and something of real importance can happen, instead of a toy world which only moves when He pulls the strings – then we may take it it is worth paying.  
— C.S. Lewis, The Case for Christianity

John 14:15 If ye love me, keep my commandments.

John 14:21 He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.

John 15:10 If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

1John 5:3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.

People who look at religion as a

system of holiness laws miss out on so much. Loving God is not all about which days you don't eat meat on or how you bow and kneel and genuflect. Those are not God's laws. Yes, God does have laws, but they are not grievous. They are pretty handy, "Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness." Oh, Israel had laws. They were given to them to provide a picture of Christ. However, Jesus came and fulfilled all those laws. In Christ We are free from the law.

Rom 8:1-4 *There is* therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

2For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

3For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:

4That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

John 8:32,36 And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

36If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, have chosen it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened.

— C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Rev 3:20 Behold, I stand at the

door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

If God is knocking on the door of your heart today, make no mistake, you are free to ignore Him. But you must also understand the weight of that choice. To turn away from God's call is not neutral; it is to remain on the broad road that leads to destruction.

Matt 7:13 Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide *is* the gate, and broad *is* the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:

You are free, but you are responsible. Your will is not a victim of circumstance. It is a God-given faculty, and what you do with it matters eternally.

But in that same freedom, you are invited, today, to respond to God with a willing heart. He does not force you, but He does call you. The door is yours to open. Will you answer His call with a "Yes, Lord, I believe, I repent, I receive"? The gift of salvation is offered freely, but it must be received freely.

To the child of God: you may be wrestling with temptation, weariness, or failure. You may feel like a prisoner of your emotions or habits. But the same principle applies. You are not a puppet to your feelings. You are not a passenger on a runaway train. You have the power to say "No" to sin and "Yes" to God.

Rom 6:12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.

That command assumes something powerful. You are not helpless. By the Spirit of God who dwells within you, you are able to walk in obedience. You can decide by your will instead of deciding by your emotions...which will probably get you in trouble.

Luke 9:23 And he said to *them*

all, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross **daily**, and follow me.

So today, whether you need to respond to the gospel for the first time, or respond to God's Spirit as a believer resisting temptation, the choice is yours. You are not waiting on God. *He* is waiting on *you*. Will you answer?

1. Moral responsibility - Jas 1:13-15, Gen 39:7-9, 4:6-7
2. Rules and regulations are insufficient - Rom 13:1-5, Matt 5:27-28, 23:23-25
3. By a free will we are free to choose God - Deu 30:19, Josh 24:15, Isa 55:6,7, John 3:36, 14:15, 14:21, 15:10, 5:3, Rom 8:1-4, John 8:32,36, Rev 3:20, Matt 7:13, Rom 6:12, Luke 9:23

1. "In the early 1950s less than 5 percent of US workers were required to have a license from a state government in order to perform their jobs legally," observed the Brookings Institution in a study last year. "By 2008, the share of workers requiring a license to work was estimated to be almost 29 percent." To become a barber in Massachusetts, as Leon Neyfakh noted in the Boston Globe last year, a prospective hair-cutter must spend 1,000 hours of study at a barber school, followed by a year and a half as an apprentice. Florida mandates a minimum of six years of training before it will license an interior designer. In Oklahoma, anyone wishing merely to sell caskets has to earn a degree in mortuary science, undergo a year-long apprenticeship in funeral services, and pass a state-mandated exam.

To compel would-be surgeons and

airline pilots to obtain the government's imprimatur as a condition of employment is one thing. But when the states impose licensing mandates on locksmiths and yoga instructors and hair braiders and florists, they clearly aren't being motivated by concern for public safety and the well-being of powerless consumers.

Two years ago, the Institute for Justice filed a federal lawsuit in Georgia challenging a Savannah ordinance that barred private individuals from giving tours without a license. To get a license, tour guides were required to pass an elaborate test on local history and architecture, obtain medical certification, and pay recurring fees to city hall. After a year of litigation, Savannah backed down and repealed the ordinance.

Other gains have come in Arizona, where Governor Doug Ducey just signed legislation repealing state license requirements for a number of jobs, including driving instructor, citrus fruit packer, and cremationist. In North Carolina, a bill underway in the legislature would make it lawful to earn a living — without needing government approval — as a laser hair remover, sign-language interpreter, acupuncturist, and pastoral counselor. Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts recently signed a measure liberating hair-braiders from licensing rules.

<http://townhall.com/columnists/jeffjacoby/2016/06/06/should-you-need-the-governments-permission-to-work-n2173916>