

Free Will or Free Grace?

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In Christian theology man is usually considered in four different states or relations to God:

1. As he was when God first created him. This is known as the State of Integrity or Innocence or Nature. In this state his will was free, ie holy but liable to sin.
2. As he is now that he has fallen from this original state. This is known as the State of Sin, or of Guilt and Depravity. In this state his will is inclined only to evil, because he is now the willing slave of sin.
3. As he is after being born anew from above. This is known as the State of Regeneration or of Grace. In this state man's will is inclinable to both good and evil. His new regenerate nature inclines him to what is good, but the remains of his old sinful nature drag him down to evil.
4. As he is in eternity. This is known as the State of Glory or of Damnation. If he has been chosen in Christ, called effectually by the Gospel, justified and sanctified, his will in glory is wholly inclined to good. But if he has been reprobated by God, passed by and condemned for his sin, and has lived out his life without believing on Christ or repenting of his sin, then his will in hell is wholly inclined to evil.

Now the question at issue is not about man in innocence or grace or glory, but whether man in his fallen and corrupt state has the will to turn himself to God, either by deciding in his heart to do so or by performing any spiritual act which God regards as good.

Roman Catholic Jesuits and Protestant Arminians claim that with God's help man since the Fall has the ability to prepare himself or co-operate with God in the work of his own salvation. Man's will is thus made the hinge on which the great matter of his salvation swings.

Reformed Protestants, on the other hand, affirm that man has no such ability. 'Not using his free will aright, man [ie Adam] lost both it and himself.' (Augustine of Hippo). Rather, he is wholly dependent on God's free grace to work a change in him which will effectively bring him back to God in Christ.

The true state of the question therefore really amounts to this: Is man saved by free will or by free grace? In this pamphlet we propose with God's help to give the Biblical answer.

Now man's will may be said to deal with three different things:

(1) Natural things, such as eating, drinking, hearing, seeing, walking, talking and the like. In these the Bible teaches that he has free will to choose or to refuse what is before him. Yet even this freedom does not operate outside God's superintending providence. When Pontius Pilate asserted his right to judge Him, Jesus replied: 'Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above.' (John 19:11).

(2) Civil or moral things, such as voting, learning about laws and virtues, attending a place of worship, being conscientious and honest at work, remaining loyal to certain relationships, professing to be a Christian and even listening carefully to sermons, reading edifying books, and saying prayers. In these too he has a large measure of free will, though even here (as Augustine again says) his will is morally weak and maimed. Neither are such acts of the will outside God's providential control.

(3) Spiritual things, such as believing on Christ for salvation, repenting of every sin, doing the will of God from the heart, keeping himself from evil imaginations, reasoning, lusts and selfish motives, and seeking the glory of God in his thought, speech and actions. In this area man is wholly impotent, for his will is in bondage to sin and Satan, and is wholly averse to all spiritual good.

For our position we offer the following Biblical texts and arguments:

1. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself informs us that out of man's heart come only 'evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.' (Mark 7:21-22). What a catalogue of sins is here! Nor must we understand Jesus to say that we become sinners by committing these sins. No! He is saying that we commit these sins because we are sinners. Sinfulness itself characterizes man's heart; the sins are simply its fruit. They come out of the heart because they are already in the heart. Are we prepared to contradict the Son of God, who knows what is in man?

Again, God says through the prophet Jeremiah: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?' (Jer 17:9).

The very reason why God flooded the earth in Noah's day and why He will not flood it again was because He saw that every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually. (Gen 6:5; 8:21). That is, He expects nothing from man but sin. And since man has not changed since then, shall we be bold enough to gainsay God?

2. Furthermore, the Saviour tells us that the 'evil tree' of man's corrupt nature 'cannot bring forth good fruit.' (Matt 12:33; 7:17). In the same vein the patriarch Job asks: 'Who can bring a clean thing out of that which is unclean?' and answers: 'Not one.' (Job 14:4).

God Himself expresses the same truth in another form: '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). Again, we read that 'the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ... neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.' (1 Cor 2:14). If these texts do not speak of man's inability to do good, nothing does.

3. Thirdly, we are expressly told that those who do believe on Christ for salvation do so not by the will and choice of man, but by the regenerating act of God. (John 1:13). Indeed, the power needed to enable us to believe is no less than the power that God exercised in creation: 'For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' (2 Cor 4:6).

When Lydia the seller of purple dye and cloth was converted under the apostle Paul's preaching, it was not Lydia who opened her heart to the Lord, neither was it Paul or her companions in the prayer-meeting, neither was it the moral power of the Word preached. It was the Lord Himself. (Acts 16:14).

Furthermore, we read on this point that God's people are made willing in the day of His power, not when they will or in a day of their power. (Psa 110:3). By a sweet kind of violence without violating their will, says Ralph Erskine, from being unwilling to serve Him in holiness He makes them willing.

It must be a very proud man who can claim that, even when he was dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1), he brought himself to spiritual life. How can a spiritually dead sinner perform a work which is

impossible to anyone but God? Says Augustine: 'The grace of God must of necessity precede every good work of ours, or else no good will be done.'

4. Then again, we are told in Holy Scripture that all man's actions before he is born from above by the grace of God are nothing but sin.

Consider the following texts: 'Whatsoever is not of faith is sin,' (Rom 14:23); 'without faith it is impossible to please Him,' (Heb 11:6); 'the ploughing of the wicked is sin,' (Prov 21:4); 'the thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord,' (Prov 15:26); 'the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord,' (Prov 15:8).

Since this is so, what hope have the graceless of even preparing themselves to receive grace, let alone save themselves? The fact is, we must become God's workmanship, created unto good works before we can walk in them. (Eph 2:10).

Our claim is not that man's will is compelled to do something it does not want to do, but that God changes it till it wants to do good according to His will.

This is why Scripture says that every good thing we receive comes from God, not ourselves (James 1:17), and why Paul asks the rhetorical question: 'What hast thou that thou hast not received?' (1 Cor 4:7). Everything good about us is ascribed only to free grace, and not free will.

So, says Paul again: 'By the grace of God I am what I am.' (1 Cor 15:10). And again: 'It is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.' (Phil 2:13). And again: 'He that hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.' (Phil 1:6). And so Isaiah confesses: 'Lord, ... thou also hast wrought all our works in us.' (Isa 26:12). Only when God has worked first do we begin to do good works.

5. Lastly, we apply one further test as to whether salvation is by free will or free grace. It is this: the teaching that brings most glory to God and removes all glorying from man must be the truth. Now the Jesuitical and Arminian doctrine of free will makes sinful man a partner with God in his salvation. By ascribing the first part to God's grace and the second part to man's free will it robs God of His glory and shares it with man. Indeed, it gives more glory to man than to God, since all depends on whether he will co-operate with God. The choice is his.

Yet in the same passage in which He reveals that He will bring salvation through Christ, God distinctly says: 'My glory will I not give to another.' Therefore the Church sings unto the Lord a new song, and His praise from the end of the earth. (Isa 42:8,10).

So too, after teaching that God chooses the foolish to confound the wise, the weak to confound the mighty, the base and despised and the nothings of this world to confound those who are something, Paul adduces the reason: 'that no flesh should glory in His presence', adding the strong injunction: 'He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.' (1 Cor 1:27-29,31). The martyr Cyprian used to say: 'we must not glory in any case, for we have nothing to glory of.' Even Bonaventura, the so-called Seraphic Doctor, acknowledged that 'this has been the practice of all godly and religious-minded men in the world, to ascribe the whole glory of our conversion and salvation to the grace of God, and nothing to free will.'

In the light of the often-mentioned claims: 'I decided for Christ', or 'I gave my heart to Jesus', our Saviour's words reach us with fresh meaning and solemnity: 'He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory, but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, that man is true.' (John 7:18).

The huge mistake on which all the claims on behalf of free will are made is the belief that because God commands a thing to be done, then we are able to do it. If man is not free to do what God commands him, so the argument runs, then those commands become a sheer mockery of man's impotence.

To this basic error we offer a two-fold reply:

(1) The commands of God do not signify what we are able to do, but what we ought to do. They address our duty not our ability. Let us give God the glory of having the right to require from us whatever He pleases, even though we are totally unable to give it. He at first made us upright in Adam, and our sin and fall in him in no way reduces God's right over us.

(2) God commands us to do what He knows we cannot do so that we will be driven to confess our inability, beg His mercy and seek the grace and salvation in Christ which alone will enable us to obey Him. So King David confesses: 'Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently. O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!' (Psa 119:4-5). So Augustine prays: 'Give what thou commandest, then command what thou wilt.' All our sufficiency is of God.

The sum of the Reformed teaching, which is clearly that of Scripture also, is concisely and beautifully expressed by Augustine, the great defender of God's free grace against man's free will: 'The human will does not obtain grace by freedom, but it obtains freedom by grace.' Let us then seek grace to hear the Saviour saying to us: 'If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.' 'If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.' (John 8:31-32,36).