

## THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

When someone tells you to do something, there are often three factors involved, ability to do it, willingness to do it, and the actual doing it. If you can do it, but are not willing, you do not do it. If you cannot do it, although you are willing, you do not do it.

Before the fall, Eve was able to keep God's command not to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan attacked her willingness to obey, and she disobeyed. God commanded Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" Although he had the ability, at first, he hardened his heart, and did not let them go. The sad truth is that, since the fall, human beings in their natural state have their wills dominated by sin and Satan in spiritual matters. They are like a pendulum on a grandfather clock that unnaturally swings only on one side of the arc, the devil's side.

There has been a long history about the freedom of the will. From the age of the apostles, heretics called "Gnostics" said that the salvation of each person had been determined beforehand. Valentinians said that human beings were of three classes, of spirit, of soul, or of clay. The spiritual would automatically be saved through knowing how things really are, those of clay could not, and those "of soul" could move either way. Christians in the second and third centuries reacted against Gnosticism by over-emphasising the freedom of the will, so that they understood God's grace merely as assistance. Much of the theology of the Eastern Church was spoilt by this emphasis. In the West, too, the Celtic Pelagius, a monk, reacted to Augustine along these lines: Pelagius argued that God is not so unloving that He commands us to do what we are not able to do. He concluded that we must have the ability. He said that, since God provides the willingness, our task is to be willing, and to do what He wants. He said that Augustine's teaching about original sin undermined reason, conscience, and responsibility. Pelagius saw himself defending moral struggle and moral progress. He held that, because God commands that we should believe in Him, we not only should, but we also can. He said that we are slack if we answer, "It is hard. We cannot." Understandably, his debate with Augustine focused on human nature and God's grace.

We might picture Pelagius' view on the analogy of a bike race. In his kindness, God maps out the course, graciously providing His commandments for us to obey. In His Son Jesus Christ, He kindly gives us an example of a perfect performer. He graciously supplies the "bicycle", gives the "rider" the power "to push the pedals." People's task is to be willing to ride the race, and to complete the race (attain eternal life). For Pelagius, Adam's transgression was a defect in him alone, except that it resulted in a bad environment, which influenced his descendants.

Down through the Middle Ages some people (like Gottschalk) took strongly Augustinian positions on predestination, original sin, and the will of man, and people like John Cassian and many other monks took a semi-Pelagian line. Many books were published with the title "On free will." There were many discussions of stock themes, among them God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Erasmus also wrote a book against Luther, called "On the freedom of the will." Luther replied with a book that to the end of his life he regarded as one of his most important writings, "On the bondage of the will."

How should we assess these discussions? It is not logical to argue from what we ought to do to our ability to do it. It is doctrinally incorrect to ignore the consequences of the fall into sin. There is a difference between Adam before the fall into sin and Adam after the fall. In the fall, Adam and all his descendants lost the perfect knowledge of God. This is true of those who are unregenerate: It is also improper to speak of people who have become believers as if they had freedom of the will. When Paul wrote about himself as a regenerate Christian, he still also wrote, "I have sinful human nature, and am sold under sin."

It is important to talk correctly about free will. In secular affairs, after the fall, we are still rational creatures, with the ability to think and decide, and we feel that we have the option of doing things and not doing them. Shall I mop the floor today, or leave it till tomorrow? We feel we have the freedom to decide for or against. In this area, we can be willing and able to do things.

There is another complication. When there is an accident, we reproach ourselves, "If only we had not gone shopping!" However, God is the directing agent in the relationship between God and man. From God's point of view, He not only controls and permits what happens in this world, so that nothing takes Him by surprise, but also uses whatever happens for the benefit of his dear children.

In spiritual matters, because of what human nature is after the fall into sin, a human being is like a donkey with the Devil on its back. He can only go the Devil's way. Human beings since the fall can think, desire, choose, and do only what displeases God. Nothing in their minds or hearts inclines them towards God. Paul wrote, "An unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually." Human beings since the fall cannot receive,

believe, or trust what they hear and learn in the Gospel. Paul wrote, “The way of thinking that belongs to the sinful nature is hostile to God.” That is why Paul also wrote that the crucified Christ is an obstacle to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. The apostle John summed up the human tragedy: “The Light is shining in the dark, and the darkness has not understood it.”

We are left with the paradox that sinful human beings have the ability to continue to reject the grace and salvation of God. When God deals directly with people, no one can resist him. When he raises the dead at the last day, no one will be able to decline. It is different when God deals with people indirectly, through means. Though God preserves human life through means, such as food and reproduction, human beings have the ability or to refuse to eat or to have children. When God deals with people through the means of the Gospel and the sacraments, human beings have the ability to reject His grace in Christ. We can cite an analogy that a person can take his own life, but a dead person cannot make himself alive again. In the spiritual sphere, human beings who are spiritually blind, dead, without righteousness, and actively resisting God do not have the ability to believe God or keep his commandments.

The conversion of human beings is a miracle of God’s grace. In it, He makes an unwilling person willing. Jesus said, “A person can come to Me only if the Father, who has sent Me, draws him.” The Holy Spirit, through the Good News about what Jesus has done, turns people about-face, from hating God to trusting him, from bondage to freedom, from Satan’s power to children of God, and from death to life. Human beings do not choose, they are chosen.

Faith is not the result of our deciding or reasoning or the co-operation of our wills. Rather, the Holy Spirit has called us through the Gospel, enlightened us with his gifts, sanctified and kept us in the true faith. In Jesus Christ, we are free from the wrath of God, free from sin, and free to be willing slaves of God and our fellowmen. We are free from the Law, and under grace. We are free from condemnation, with peace of conscience. We are children of God, the heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.