

§ 10. Doctrine of Man
Lecture 26
Freedom of the Will

Welcome to Defenders! I'm glad that you could join us.

In our discussion of the doctrine of man, we've been thinking now for many weeks about man as sinner. We've just finished a discussion of the doctrine of original sin.

Today we want to turn to the topic of the freedom of the will. The operative question in this section is this: Given our fallenness and sinfulness before God, do we have the freedom to respond to God's gracious initiatives? Or are we completely passive, if not resistant, such that all of the activity and efficacy of salvation comes from the divine side?

Let's begin by looking at some biblical data on this question. Let's look first at four Pauline passages from the New Testament that speak to this subject.

First is Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast."

Second is Romans 9:6-25. Speaking of Israel's failure to attain salvation, Paul writes,

It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants. For this is what the promise said, "About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son." And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, she was told, "The elder will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills. You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made

me thus?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea,

“Those who were not my people
I will call ‘my people,’
and her who was not beloved
I will call ‘my beloved.’”

Then in Romans 10:6-13, Paul goes on to say:

But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Finally, in Galatians 3:6-9 Paul writes,

Thus Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith.

These are the scriptural data that we want to reflect upon concerning the freedom of the will.

Let’s turn now to various attempts to systematize these biblical data.

First, let’s look at what the Protestant Reformers had to say about the question of the freedom of the will. The Reformers held to the so-called “bondage of the will.” Infected with original sin, fallen man is incapable of freely choosing for God and appropriating his

grace. So Martin Luther, for example, held that human beings are, as he put it, free in things below but bound in things above. That is to say, Luther was willing to grant that human beings have freedom of the will with respect to earthly affairs, for example, the decision to shop at Publix instead of at Trader Joe's. But, when it comes to things above (that is to say, spiritual matters), man's sinfulness has bound his will, so that man is not free to choose for God and to appropriate his grace. Rather, redemption must come entirely from God's side. It is God who chooses and saves whom he wills.

The Swiss Reformer John Calvin was even more stringent than Luther in his view of the bondage of the will. Calvin emphasized the doctrine of total depravity – that every aspect of the human person is fallen and infected with sin. Being thus totally depraved, you have no ability to respond to God's offer of salvation. Preaching the Gospel to you is like preaching to a dead man because you are dead in your sins. So God must unconditionally elect those whom he wills to save, and he simply passes over those whom he does not elect to save, and they are damned as a result.

Following on total depravity and unconditional election is God's irresistible grace. Given that saving grace comes from God alone and that God is omnipotent, God's grace is irresistible by human beings. Bound in sin, you do not have the freedom to respond to God's grace, but neither do you have the freedom to resist God's grace because God has unconditionally elected to save you. Therefore, if by his sovereign decree, he wills that you will be saved, then you will be saved, and his grace will inevitably and irresistibly produce its effect in you. So salvation is totally determined from the side of God.

The foregoing is the sense in which the Protestant Reformers affirmed the doctrine of *sola gratia* (that is, salvation by grace alone). It is not simply that we are saved through no merit of our own but only by God's undeserved favor. It is much more than that. The Reformers affirmed an irresistible grace that you have no power to refuse. There is nothing about you that would prompt God to choose you, such as a disposition to have faith in God; rather he simply sovereignly chooses to save whomever he wills, and he gives irresistible grace to those persons alone, and as a result they are saved. So there is no freedom of the will with respect to salvation.

Next time we will consider the view of the Catholic Counter-Reformers concerning freedom of the will. Until next time then, have a blessed week.¹

¹ ?Total Running Time: 13:37 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)