

Free Will
Dr. Jerry Nelson

We all know that we have the ability to make choices. We call that freedom or free will. But if we investigate the concept a little more carefully, we understand there are limitations to our free will. We usually define free will as the ability to choose with absolute indifference – under no compulsion of any kind (internal or external). This would suggest that the human will is “inclined to neither good nor evil but it exists in a state of moral neutrality.” (Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 131)

But that is contrary to what the Bible teaches. The Bible says we are not morally neutral, we are limited. We are influenced in our choices. The Bible says we are influenced by sin – we are captive to sin, we are dead in our sins.

In fact we are influenced by the strongest inclination at the moment. R.C. Sproul illustrates it this way: We want to lose weight and decide to diet. We do well until hunger becomes a stronger inclination than our desire to lose weight. We choose based on inclination. ^(ibid) We are free to make choices but our choices are limited.

Think of it this way: Does God have free will? Of course, he does. God is totally free. But even God is limited; he is morally unable to sin. He is free, but only for goodness. He has no desire or inclination to sin. And yet we would say he is totally free.

So it is with the unregenerate, the non-Christian. He is totally free to do what he is capable of. And the Bible says that he is incapable of doing anything righteous. And judged by God’s holy standard, the unsaved person is able only to sin. He is free but only within the bounds of his moral nature.

Yes we have free will, freedom, but only within the range of options available to us. The non-Christian is not free to follow God, nor does he want to. It will take the supernatural intervention of God’s Spirit through regeneration and effectual calling to give the non-Christian the ability to believe and follow Christ.

John Piper
From a sermon delivered on Nov 3, 2002

“When I entered seminary I believed in the freedom of my will, in the sense that it was ultimately self-determining. I had not learned this from the Bible; I absorbed it from the independent, self-sufficient, self-esteeming, self-exalting air that you and I breathe every day of our lives in America. The sovereignty of God meant that he can do anything with me that I give him permission to do. With this frame of mind I entered a class on Philippians with Daniel Fuller and class on the doctrine of salvation with James Morgan.

In Philippians I was confronted with the intractable ground clause of chapter 2 verse 13: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure," which made God the will beneath my will and the worker beneath my work. The question was not whether I had a will; the question was why I willed what I willed. And the ultimate answer – not the only answer – was God.

In the class on salvation we dealt head on with the doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace. Romans 9 was the watershed text and the one that changed my life forever. Romans 9:11-12 said, "Though they [Jacob and Esau] 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 older will serve the younger.'" And when Paul raised the question in verse 14, "Is there injustice on God's part?" He says, no, and quotes Moses (in verse 15): "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." And when he raises the question in verse 19, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" He answers in verse 21, "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?"

Emotions run high when you feel your man-centered world crumbling around you. I met Dr. Morgan in the hall one day. After a few minutes of heated argument about the freedom of my will, I held a pen in front of his face and dropped it to the floor. Then I said, with not as much respect as a student ought to have, "I [!] dropped it." Somehow that was supposed to prove that my choice to drop the pen was not governed by anything but my sovereign self.

But thanks be to God's mercy and patience, at the end of the semester I wrote in my blue book for the final exam, "Romans 9 is like a tiger going about devouring free-willers like me." That was the end of my love affair with human autonomy and the ultimate self-determination of my will. My worldview simply could not stand against the scriptures, especially Romans 9. And it was the beginning of a lifelong passion to see and savor the supremacy of God in absolutely everything."