

The Better Way

Volume XXXIX, Issue 10

March 3, 2024

SPRING CHURCH OF CHRIST

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SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

SUNDAY

Bible Study.....9:00 a.m.
Worship.....10:00 a.m.
Afternoon Worship.....1:00 p.m.

WEDNESDAY

Bible Study.....7:30 p.m.
(via Zoom Meetings)

ELDERS

David P. Brown
Ken Cohn
John West

DEACONS

Bret Bailey
J. D. Gunter
Eric Paluka

EVANGELIST

David P. Brown

SECRETARY

Sonya West

THE DIVINE PRINCIPLE OF FREE MORAL AGENCY (Part 1)

Franklin Camp

My subject is both simple and difficult. In fact, most subjects have a simple and a difficult side. The subject assigned me is the principle of the free moral agency of man. The simplicity of this subject may be seen in the fact that those of you who are here tonight are here by choice and because you are free moral agents.

Free moral agency does not mean that there are no limitations. There is no such thing as absolute freedom without any limitations. Someone may say, "Is not God utterly and entirely free and without limitations?" My answer is, No. There are some limitations that belong to God. There are certain limitations that characterize Him. The character of God limits Him in some ways. There are some things that God cannot do: **"That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us"** (Heb. 6:18). It is impossible for God to lie. The character of God places this limitation upon Him. The character and the nature of God are of truth. This limits God and makes it impossible for Him to lie. His character forbids lying.

Since God's character places some limitations upon Him, one should not be surprised that, though man is a free moral agent, it is not without some limitations. While man is free to make his choices, there are limitations that apply to him. God determines the consequences of the choices that man makes. One cannot make wrong choices without suffering the consequences thereof. One is free to make the choices, but then certain consequences, rewards, or curses, come with the choices that one makes.

The prodigal son was free to go to the far country, but he was not free to determine the consequences that came from his choices. There was no way he could make the wrong choice and avoid the difficulties and the suffering in the hog pen.

I mentioned that there is a simple side to this subject, but there is also the difficult side. The difficulty comes in being able to reconcile God on the one side and the free moral agency of man on the other. I am convinced that one of the real problems in the religious world today is its failure to reconcile these two. Some of the inconsistencies of the denominational world are tied to its failure to reconcile the sovereignty of God on the one side and the free moral agency of man on the other. The failure to reconcile these leads to all kinds of erroneous doctrines.

No man can defend Calvinism consistently and at the same time uphold the free moral agency of man. Man cannot be free in the Calvinistic system. If before man was ever created God decided that certain ones would be saved, and that without any responsibility on their part, while the non-elect would be lost and they could do nothing about it, where is the free moral agency of man? He is only a machine that is maneuvered by

God. This false doctrine of Calvinism leads to further doctrines that are false which also deny the free moral agency of man.

Calvinism teaches that man is totally depraved and, being totally depraved, he cannot make a right choice. If man is totally depraved and cannot make a right choice, where is his free moral agency in doing anything that is right?

There are some other subjects that are related to the one that we are studying tonight. Man's accountability is determined by his free moral agency. If man is not a free moral agent, then one eliminates his accountability. For example, here is one who is an idiot, insane. Such a one is not held accountable for one's actions because of one's inability to make the proper choices, to make the proper decisions. Therefore, accountability is eliminated. It is only upon the basis of one's being able to make choices that accountability can be sustained.

But again, the essence of sin is related to the subject we are studying tonight. What is sin? If a man is born in sin, where is man's free moral agency? He did not become a sinner by choice. If he did not become a sinner by choice, then how is he accountable?

Furthermore, God's method and message of redemption are related to the question of man's free moral agency. If man is a free moral agent, then there are certain things that will be inherent in the scheme of redemption. On the other hand, if man is unable to make choices, if he is unable to hear and to heed that which God has said to him, based upon his own accountability and responsibility, then the nature of the Bible will be affected by this.

Here is the reason that some say that, though the Bible is the divine revelation from God, it cannot be understood apart from a direct operation of the Holy Spirit. Thus, one is not free to read the Bible and understand it apart from the direct operation of the Holy Spirit. If this is true, how could one be held accountable for not understanding it if the Holy Spirit did not operate directly to guide one? But then, if the Holy Spirit did not operate directly to guide one, would God not be a respecter of persons in failing to guide one to understand what the Bible teaches?

Then again, there are others who say that man cannot obey the truth of the Bible apart from the direct operation of the Spirit which gives him the power to obey. If it is the overpowering of the Spirit which leads him into obedience, again I ask, where is man's free moral agency, and where is man's accountability? How could one resist the Spirit if this is the method by which the Spirit leads one to obey the will of God?

In order to understand man's free moral agency, one must know something about man himself. The Psalmist said, "**What is man that thou art mindful of him?**" If man is a free moral agent, what kind of being is he? Therefore, it is worthwhile to stop and to study this question.

Man is composed of two parts—body and spirit. Each part of man was designed by God, arranged by God, and intended to function in a certain area of life. The physical body is adapted for fulfilling its purpose in the physical and material world. It is through the physical body that one relates to the material universe and the physical world. It is through the physical body that one lives by breathing and eating and drinking. God made the body that way and adapted the body to that end.

God feeds the physical body in harmony with the way that He made it. God does not violate the way that He sustains the physical body. One does not have any difficulty appreciating the fact that God made man and adapted him to the physical world, that the body is designed to enable him to function in the world.

Consider the body. One relates to the physical universe in which one lives through the physical senses and by one's ability to reason. It is through one's eyes and ears, or the five senses, that one relates to the physical world. God does not violate this particular arrangement which He has made. When Christ was on earth He performed miracles, and when He performed miracles of healing, He did it in keeping with the way that God made man.

For example, in John 9, Jesus healed a blind man. He did not make him see through his ears. I am satisfied that He could have—that is, He had the power to do it. But why did He not do it that way? Because the body is arranged to function in a certain way in relationship to the material world. God adapted the body to see with the eyes and to hear with the ears. When Jesus healed the blind man, then he performed a miracle in keeping with the way that God had arranged and had made man to function in the physical world.

He healed a deaf man, but he did not make him hear with his tongue or with his eyes. I am sure that he had the power to have done it that way if he had so desired, but that would have violated the very nature of the way that God made man to function.

Man's physical body is not all there is to man. Many live as though that is all there is to man, but that is not true. Man has not only a body but a mind. It is this that separates man from other beings. It is his mind—at least this is one of the ways—in which causes man is made in the likeness of God. When God gave man a mind, He

adapted his mind to the world in which he lived—that is, the spiritual world. It is through this means that one is able to receive information, to hear arguments, to weigh facts, and upon the basis of these to choose to either believe or to reject. This is the way that God made man; and, surely, whatever God has done in giving the scheme of redemption, it is related to the way He made man.

As the knowledge of the world comes through one's physical senses and ability to reason, all spiritual knowledge comes by faith. There is no other way for one to know God except through faith. This is a designed, arranged order in relationship to the way that God made man. **“Faith cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of God”** (Rom. 10:1). Here is the order that we have—the word spoken, hearing, faith, feeling, and action. All the things that come to the spiritual man through the revelation of God come through these avenues.

God does not violate the way that He made the spiritual man and his approach to Him in spiritual things any more than He violates the physical man and the way that He made him. Man's free moral agency is based upon the way that God made him, both physically and spiritually. **“Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse”** (Deu. 11:26). The phrase **“I set before you”** suggests the idea of alternatives. Alternatives suggest choice. Choice shows the necessity of free moral agency.

Willard Collins told me of an incident he heard brother E.R. Harper relate. Brother Harper's father was a Calvinist. A man came to the community and held a tent meeting, and brother Harper's father was not too impressed with what he heard. But then another man came to hold a meeting and put up a chart, and on that chart he drew a tree and a man tied to the tree and then God, standing off and saying, **“Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”** It did not take brother Harper's father long to see that there was something wrong with that picture. If the man was tied to a tree where he could not do anything, where he was not free, then something had to be out of kilter. He knew it would be contrary to the nature of God and the love of God to tie a man to a tree and then invite him to come to Him. That led brother Harper's father to give up the false idea of Calvinism and come to a knowledge of the truth, recognizing his free moral agency and his responsibility and accountability to hear and obey the gospel of Christ.

I mentioned that the real problem in the religious world is that of reconciling the sovereignty of God and the free moral agency of

man. In the time that I have left I want to try to set forth some things that will help illustrate and show what the Bible teaches upon this subject. Let me make some statements that I hope will help to clarify some of the problems. I think this strikes at a part of the faulty misunderstanding of the religious world.

When one begins to talk about God's part in redeeming man from sin, one is talking about the grace of God. How is the grace of God related to the free moral agency, the accountability, and the responsibility of man? How can there be God's grace on the one side and man's responsibility on the other? Here is the crux of the problem out of which grows the misunderstanding of the greater part of the religious world today. Out of this misunderstanding has developed most of the perverted denominational doctrines concerning redemption from sin.

Listen carefully to what I am going to say: Grace is always unmerited. Grace depends entirely upon God, not man. All of grace, not some, but all of grace comes in the realm of God's responsibility and God's work. On that side there is not anything that man can do. There is no place for man in this area of redemption. So, grace is unmerited favor.

This has to do with the things that God has done to redeem man. For example, man could not devise a plan that would save. Men have attempted to, but they have all been rejected by God. All the plans that are conceived by men come short of honoring God on the one side and saving man on the other.

Consider a second statement: Guilt is always merited. Never is there guilt that is not merited. When one puts these two statements together, one can see the distinction between God's grace on one side and guilt on the other—that is, the guilt of man. Keeping these things clearly in mind will help one understand the problem with which we are dealing and will help one to see the sovereignty of God and man's free moral agency.

The general denominational idea is that sin is inherited but not the guilt of sin. Where is there sin apart from guilt? Where did men learn this? The Bible teaches clearly that grace belongs entirely to God and yet sets forth just as clearly man's accountability and responsibility for his sins.

How do man's responsibility and accountability harmonize with the grace of God? How are the sovereignty of God and the grace of God going to be able to work so as to make it possible for man to be responsible and accountable for his sins? The free moral agency is the very thing that is brought into play in this connection.

There are some things in the Old Testament that I think will help to clear up the problem that I am discussing. The book of Jeremiah sets forth clearly the sovereignty of God. It not only sets forth the sovereignty of God, it sets forth the grace of God and the accountability and responsibility of man.

Jeremiah prophesied during the dark days of Judah. The nation had become so corrupt and hardened in its sin that God told Jeremiah there was no need in praying for them. They had become so hardened in sin that only judgment could await them.

Jeremiah said, **“The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars.”** He announced, **“Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord”** (Jer. 17:1, Jer.17:5).

In contrast, he stated, **“Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is”** (Jer. 17:7). Then he reminded them of the deceitfulness of man’s heart and the inability of man to devise his own ways. Then in verse 10 of chapter 17, he said, **“I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.”**

Then in verse 12, he states a truth that sets forth the sovereignty of God: **“A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary.”** Amid the gloom and the suffering and the darkness of his day, in a day that seemed to be utterly hopeless, only judgment awaiting, Jeremiah saw a glorious throne set on high from the beginning as the place of sanctuary.

This throne set on high from the beginning is a symbol of the sovereignty of God. Even though the days looked dark, the way difficult and hopeless, this was God’s way of reminding Jeremiah and all the nation that He was still in control.

The sovereignty of God did not do away with the responsibility the accountability of man. The throne of God had been there from the beginning. From the time that man sinned in the Garden of Eden, things had never been out of control. Man had been left free to make his own choices, but this did not eliminate the sovereignty and the control of God.

ARTICLE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

- **Tuesday, March 26th:** Ladies’ Bible Class
- **March 29th-31st:** Spanish congregation lectureship.

THOSE TO SERVE

SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2024

Announcements	Ken Cohn
Scripture Reading	J.D. Gunter <i>Rev. 9:12-21</i>
Song Leader	Gary Blasingame
Prayer	Andrew Paluka/J.D. Gunter (AM) John West/Jonathan West (PM)
Speakers	David Brown
	Lord’s Table (AM) (John 19:31-37)
Joshua West	Bret Bailey
Zack Nero	Eric Paluka
	Lord’s Table (PM)
J.D. Gunter	Ben Gunter
Audio/Video Monitor	Jonathan West
Camera/Door Monitor	J.D. Gunter

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2024

(via Zoom Meetings)

Announcements	Eric Paluka
Speaker	J.D. Gunter
Bible Class Teacher	David Brown

FOR MARCH

Prepare Communion	L. Paluka
Lock Buildings	Nero
Prepare Bulletin Board	TBA

IN NEED OF PRAYERS

Ken & Nancy Cohn, Edith Young, Bob Terry, Glenda Hackworth, Zack Nero, Cynthia Jackson, Elnora Oxendine, Bernice Hastings, Charles & Ann Nero, Nathaniel Rimmer, Chuck & Nancy Verkist, Freda Smith, Noah Hackworth, Orlinda Chumbley, Carmen Hardy, and Roelf & Janice Ruffner.

TEST YOUR BIBLE KNOWLEDGE

What chapter lists the camping places of Israel in the wilderness?

Answer to last week’s question:
King of Bashan; Num. 32:33