

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

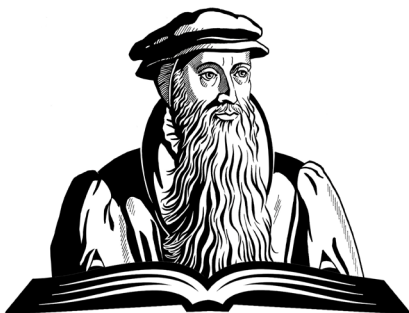
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 3:

ANTHROPOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

Lecture 4

THE FREEDOM OF MAN'S WILL



The John Knox Institute
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Module 3 ~ Lecture 4

The Freedom of Man's Will

Let me begin with a question: Why do we do what we do? Now, I'm speaking broadly. In all the various situations and circumstances of life, the little things and the big things, what prompts us to do the things we do? Well that is a far more difficult question than we sometimes realize. Why? Well, because there are many complex factors—various layers of motivations within us that influence our decisions. It is true that circumstances outside of us, including other people, may impact us. But in the end, we decide to do what we do. They are our decisions that flow from our own motivations. Ultimately, we do what we want to do, and what we want is the real issue. Consequently, we have to know something about our heart to ascertain the reason behind our actions. Jesus notes this, in reference to our words. He says, “Out of the heart the mouth speaketh.” The heart is the source for our speech. The mouth is a window to the soul. As someone aptly said, the matter of the heart is the heart of the matter. The exercise of our will is the fruit, but our spiritual nature is the root from which our will springs.

Well this series of lectures, in this third module, or course, on Systematic Theology, is devoted to the study of the doctrine of man. So the purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about man, before and after the fall and the entrance of sin into the world. In this present lecture, we will explore the doctrine of The Freedom of Man's Will.

So first of all, we will begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture, to open up our consideration of the Freedom of Man's Will. In Romans 3, verses 10 to 12, we read, “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” In the opening chapters of Romans, especially beginning at chapter 1, verse 18, Paul lays out the desperate condition of fallen men. He shows that both Jews and Greeks are in a state of sin and alienated from God, due to their transgressions of God's law. In doing so, he is setting the bleak background of man's spiritual need, before he goes on to open up and expound the wonder of the gospel, beginning with justification by faith alone, apart from the deeds of the law. In the passage we cited, here in Romans 3, Paul says, “As it is written.” So he's quoting—he's quoting the authoritative Scriptures of the Old Testament, and specifically, he begins by drawing from Psalm 14 and Psalm 58. God included these words in the songs that we are to sing, so that they would be deeply implanted in our hearts and minds. We must see our great need for a Savior, and for the salvation he has secured. Well, how bad is our need? Worse than you think. Notice the words, “There is none righteous, no, not one.” This speaks to the natural man's character, or fallen, sinful, unconverted man's nature, that he is not righteous, that there are none that have righteousness that is within them, outside of the Lord Jesus Christ. It goes on, “There is none that

understandeth.” Well, this speaks to man’s natural ignorance—his ignorance of spiritual truth, that is, his inability to even see properly what is true. The text says that “none seeketh after God.” So this speaks to man’s disinclination toward God; not a gravitational pull toward the Lord, but rather quite the opposite. There’s hostility; there’s alienation from the Lord. Paul says, all have gone out of the way, and have together become unprofitable. You see man’s waywardness—his proneness to go in the direction of evil. When given the choice, he’s going to choose to go out of the way, in an unprofitable or sinful direction. And then it says there are “none that doeth good, no, not one.” Well, this is a clear statement about the unbeliever’s will. None doeth good, no, not one—speaking of his inability to do what is pleasing to the Lord. Well, notice how, in this passage, it begins with man’s character, or his nature—there are none righteous, and it concludes with the bondage of his will—his inability to do good. And as we will learn in this lecture, the connection between man’s nature and man’s will is very important for understanding this doctrine of the freedom of the will.

Well, secondly, let’s consider some of the doctrinal details regarding the Freedom of Man’s Will, and here we’ll get into the sum and substance of what this doctrine teaches. First, we need to lay out some definitions and distinctions. So in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 9, paragraph 1, it says, “God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to do good or evil.” The conversation and debate over the freedom of man’s will can generate an enormous amount of confusion. Frequently, people will equivocate, moving from one definition of free will to another, throughout the course of a single conversation. In all of theology, we have to begin with the questions, What do we mean by the word, phrase, concept that we are using, before we proceed to ask, What do the Scriptures about this. And so, I’ll mention a few common uses of the phrase, “free will,” some good, some bad.

First of all, we can define free will in terms of the fact that man makes his own choices without compulsion. So their choices are truly their choices—men are not forced, contrary to their desires. And this is true. This is, in fact, what we saw in the opening paragraph of Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 9. So that’s one example. The second is, that man can do things contrary to God’s choosing, that God cannot interfere with man’s will, or determine what is within his choosing. Thus, man’s will is, in some way, above God’s will. Well, this definition of free will is false, as we’ll come to see. Thirdly, another false definition of free will: unregenerate man has the ability to do what is morally good or evil. This is most often what is meant, when we use the phrase “free will” in theological debate, that we’ll be outlining below. And this is false. The unregenerate man is not able to do what is morally good or evil.

But one way, one helpful way of clarifying this doctrine is to consider the freedom of man’s will through the four states of man’s existence. So we consider the freedom of his will before the fall—that’s the first one; after the fall, in a state of sin—the unconverted person; thirdly, freedom of will after conversion; and then fourthly, the freedom of will of the believer in heaven. So, Augustine, the fourth-century, early church father, explained this in a very clear, concise manner, and subsequent theologians have followed his pattern, including the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 9, on the freedom of the will, as we’ll see. Augustine summarized the freedom of the will in these four states, in a simple way. And he used, of course, Latin—he was writing in a Latin language. I won’t give you the Latin phrases, but the English translations of them. In the first state, in man’s innocency, before the fall, man was able not to sin—he was able not to sin. In the second state, after the fall, the unbeliever outside of Christ is not able not to sin—not able not to sin. In the third category, the believer, after he or she has been brought to faith and repentance, and

converted, they are able to sin and not to sin—so, able to sin and not to sin. And then the fourth category would be the believer in heaven, and there, the believer is not able to sin—not able to sin at all. So we'll consider each of these, following the teaching outlined in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 9.

First of all, that first state of man, prior to the fall, in the garden. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 9, paragraph 2, says this: “Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom and power to will and to do that which was good, and well pleasing to God; but yet mutably, so that he might fall from it.” So Adam was created perfect. He was without a sinful nature. He had, as we've seen in a previous lecture, spiritual knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. He had the freedom of will to do what is good. He had the ability not to sin. But that ability was mutable, that is, it was able to change—meaning, he had the ability, he also had the ability of freedom to sin. This comes out in Ecclesiastes 7, verse 29: Solomon says, “Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions”—or many schemes or sinful devices. So that's the first state.

The second state is after the fall—man in sin. Westminster Confession, chapter 9, paragraph 3, says, “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.” In the words of Augustine, “The unconverted sinner is not able not to sin.” In other words, he has the ability to only do evil, and not to do good. Now we saw this clearly in Romans, chapter 3, where Paul says, “There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none that seeketh after God; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” We see it in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 14, “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Or you think of Paul's words to the Ephesians, in Ephesians 2, verse 1, speaking of the believer, he says, “And you hath he quickened,”—and then he talks about their past—“who were dead in trespasses and sin.” He says, you were previous dead in trespasses and sin. God had to come and enliven you. He goes on, in verses 2 and 3, to speak about the unbeliever as “children of disobedience,” and “children of wrath.” So that's the second state of man.

The third state is post-conversion, or after a person is born again and brought to faith and repentance in Christ. Westminster Confession, chapter 9, paragraph 4, says, “When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, He freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.” So the believer, in a state of saving grace, is able to sin, and able not to sin. He has the freedom of will to do both good and evil. Paul states this graphically, when he describes the experience of the believer, in Romans, chapter 7, verses 15 to 25. And there, Paul is talking about this war that is within him. There's indwelling sin, the presence of sin that still remains within the heart and life of the believer, but they also have a principle of grace that's been planted in them, so that they delight in the law of God after the inward man, and desire to please Him, but there's this struggle because of the presence of the law of sin, and it creates war. Paul says there are times when he desires to do what is good, but he doesn't do it. He desires not to do what is sinful, and he does do it. And so there's this mix of both ability to do good, and ability to do evil. In the previous chapter, Romans 6, you see this in verses 18 and 22: “Being then made free from sin, you became the servants of righteousness, . . . but now being made free from sin”—he goes

on—“and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting.” Here is the freedom of will or ability to do what is good. Well, where does this ability come from in the believer? Philippians 2, verse 13 says, “For it is God which worketh in you both to will”—there’s the will—“both to will and to do his good pleasure.”

The fourth category is the believer in heaven—the fourth state is the believer in heaven. Westminster Confession, chapter 9, paragraph 5, says, “The will of man then is made perfectly and immutably”—unchangeably—“free to do good alone, in the state of glory only.” So the believer in heaven is not able to sin. He has the ability only to do good, not evil, and that is unchangeably the case. Hebrews 12, verse 23 says, “To the general assembly and church of the first born, which are written in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all”—listen!—“and to the spirits of just men made perfect.” The soul is perfected in holiness, upon its entrance into heaven. Jude 24 says, “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.” John says something similar, in 1 John 3, verse 2, “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” And so the believer in heaven is in a state where he is not able to sin.

In summary, it’s helpful to think about the freedom of man’s will, in each of these four states. And one reason this is very important is because it makes crystal clear that man’s ability to do or choose is determined, or limited, by his inner character, or nature. Man cannot choose anything, but he can choose what is natural to him, and what he desires to do. So for example, you know, we might say that a dog is free to fly. So you look at the dog, and you say, “Okay, you can fly; you’re free to do so. Go ahead, fly if you’d like to fly,” but a dog is unable to fly—it’s not in its nature, and therefore, not in its ability to fly. Similarly, we could say to a dead man—someone who’s died—we could speak to a dead body, and say that it is free to run, to get up and run across the room. But of course, in that state of deadness, the man is unable to run. So the unbeliever’s fallen nature, outside of Christ, puts him in a position of bondage, not freedom; slavery, not liberty. When it comes to doing what is pleasing to the Lord, he is spiritually dead. He does not have the inherent ability or freedom of will to come to God, or exercise saving faith, or any of those things, without God’s divine intervention. There’s a connection between man’s nature and man’s will. In his innocency, it was of his nature to have the ability not to sin, and the ability to sin. In the state of fallen mankind, his nature, which is dead to God, is unable—he doesn’t have freedom of will—to do what is good, he only does what is evil. But then the believer is given a new nature in that third state, he’s given a new heart. The principle of grace is planted in him. He’s given the presence of the Holy Spirit, and so on. And that nature enables him, makes his will free to do both good or evil. And, of course, in the confirmed and consummated state of heaven, the nature of man is such that he is not able to sin.

Well, thirdly, next, we must consider a few errors that arise related to the Freedom of the Will. And first of all, one false view is that man’s will is uncaused, so nothing determines what we do. You’ll see this within the history of philosophy. So nothing, including God, myself, my environment, my training, or anything else impacts what I do. We are free to go against all inclinations. If this were consistent, everything would ultimately be left to happenstance and accidents. Man would be in a ship, without a rudder, at sea, in a tempestuous storm. Well, this undermines moral responsibility; it undermines all culpability. It’s absurd as a consequence—where it leads, it leads to absurdity.

Secondly, another error, the Arminian—those who hold to Arminian theology, will object. If we believe in the bondage of the will of fallen, unconverted men, that he is unable to do good, then

they will say, “He is subject to external compulsion, and does not freely choose what he wants.” But you see, this fails to recognize the connection between man’s nature and man’s ability. Unconverted man’s fallen nature controls his abilities. He does choose, he does choose freely whatever he wants, but in a state of sin, he can only want what is displeasing to God. I mean, you can even think, by way of analogy, of God himself. His nature is holy and just and righteous. He can only and inescapably do what is good. But he is not subject to external compulsion outside of himself to do so. It is who he is, to be good. He is good, and therefore, does good. And so, by way of parallel, the natural man is sinful, and therefore, he does what is sinful. His will is not free to do what is good; it’s in bondage to what is evil.

Thirdly, those that assert that the power of contrary choice—so this idea of having the power of contrary choice, to choose to the contrary—is the supreme moral value. Well, for those that say that that is the supreme moral value, they fail to grasp the significance of the Biblical notion of gracious redemption itself. The wonder of the gospel is that God gives life to those who are spiritually dead; that he gives sight to those who are blind; that he gives saving knowledge to those who are ignorant; that he takes out a heart of stone, in order that he might give a heart of flesh; that he gives his Holy Spirit unto souls. God’s grace gives us the ability to glorify God, where previously there was inability to glorify him.

Well fourthly, and lastly, we can now draw some practical applications for ourselves—just a handful. First of all, we have to recognize the relationship between a high view of God, and low view of man. People left to themselves are going to invert that. They’re going to have a high view of man—of his ability, of his freedom, of his power, and so on; and have a very low view of God. The Bible turns that right-side-up. The Bible gives us a high view of God, and a low view of man. Man’s natural condition outside of Christ is far worse than anyone realizes. They are spiritually dead—dead to God, and dead to all that is good. But not only is the bad news worse than people think, the good news is better than people realize. Because the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. The gospel is God coming and raising those who were dead. God comes in the gospel, and he gives his people abilities to serve him, to honor him, to worship him, to please him, to glorify him. The wonder of the gospel is seen in what God does, and in the unsearchable riches of his grace that are dispensed to needy sinners. This also reinforces, doesn’t it, the inescapable necessity of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again.” We can never emphasize enough the necessity of the new birth—of that sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, in the soul of a man, woman, boy, or girl, bringing them to life. It is the necessity of the Holy Spirit that is accentuated by this doctrine.

But then lastly, for the believer—the believer is left with the hope, and joy, and anticipation of heaven. What is it that gives the believer grief in this world? It is sin. Misery comes in the wake of sin, and even in our holy engagements, in worship, and in all of the things that we seek to do in the service of God, are tainted with sin, and there’s the influence of sin, and the evidence of sin, and it grieves and breaks the heart of the true Christian. But they have this hope, and they have this joy, in anticipating heaven. And one of the wonders of heaven is that they will no longer be able to sin. They’ll be without sin—perfected in holiness—a complete salvation of body and soul, and able to worship and serve and live to God’s glory, without any ability to displease him or to dishonor him. And that ought to strengthen our hearts, as John says, in the first few verses of 1 John 3. The thought of that should set us to work, in terms of purifying our hearts, and seeking to pursue holiness and godliness in this present age—to die unto sin, and to live unto righteousness.

In this lecture, we have explored The Freedom of Man’s Will. This paves the way for what is to

follow. In the next lecture, we'll turn our consideration to man's fallen condition, beginning with the Biblical doctrine of The Nature of Sin.