

Of Man's Free Will

Rm 7:14-25; WCF 9

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 28 July 2019, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Isn't it wonderful how God has created man with a will that is free to choose what he/she wants?

Imagine you're at someone's birthday dinner and there's a variety of meats to choose from: beef, lamb, pork, chicken and fish! Well, how good that, if you don't like fish or pork, you can choose to eat beef or chicken!

See? Man's will is indeed free to choose!

Well, let's be honest: choosing between different food items may have little (if any) consequences for your eternal life (i.e. whether you will one day be in heaven or in hell), but it's a whole different matter when someone chooses to steal from his boss rather than protecting his boss' property! After all, before God, stealing is a sin! The same when someone chooses to commit adultery or to kill someone! Yes, these are not just food choices that you're making. They are *moral* choices, which will have eternal consequences, unless, of course, you repent and find forgiveness in/through Christ!

Man has a free will – a will to choose to do good or to do evil!

And man's will is free in the sense that he cannot blame God for the sin he/she has freely chosen to do!²

Well, here's something quite significant...

You see, in God's dealings with man – from the beginning of the world to its end – there have been (and are) four stages:

- The stage of God's dealings with Man *Before the Fall*
- The stage of God's dealings with *Fallen Man*
- The stage of God's dealings with the *Converted Sinner (Christian)*
- And, finally, the stage of God's dealings with *Man in Glory* (i.e. with people when they're in heaven).

And you know what?

During all four these stages, God never forces people to do anything good or evil against their will!³

Well, these four stages form the four points of our sermon, i.e. the will...

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. I (chapters 1-8 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² Cf. Js 1:14 **When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.**

³ WCF 9.1 says, "God has endowed the will of man with such natural liberty that it is neither forced nor—by any absolute necessity of nature—determined to good or evil."

- of Man Before the Fall
- of Fallen Man
- of the Converted Sinner
- of Man in Glory

The Will of Man Before the Fall

My brother & sister, through about four decades of Hebrew lecturing, the Lord has blessed me with many a wonderful student! One such person was an intelligent young man by the name of Luke Grayson. Luke was new to the Christian faith at the time when I was lecturing at a Bible College up in Auckland.

Well, one night, after Hebrew class, Luke came and asked me this great question: “Pieter, if God knew that Adam and Eve would disobey Him, why did He create them with the possibility to disobey Him?” “Yes, why did God give Adam and Eve the free will to choose or not to choose to obey Him?” “Yet, not just the *free will*, but also the *ability* to not obey Him?”

Well, here is the way I tried to answer Luke’s question...

God wanted Adam & Eve to love their Maker *from their heart* – yes, because they *chose* to and *wanted* to! If God had programmed man to only ever obey his Maker – yes, if God had “hardwired” man to only always love God without the possibility of disobeying God – then, would that really have been true & heartfelt love!? No, not at all!

And so, for man to be able to love & obey God from the heart, God had to create man with a free will – a will to choose to obey God or to not obey Him!

The WCF 9.2 says it well,

*Man, in his state of innocence, had freedom and ability to will and to do what was good and well-pleasing to God, and yet not unalterably, so that he might fall from it.*⁴

My brother & sister, before sin entered the world, people did not just have the *freedom* to do good – no, God created them also with the *ability* to do good! As Ecclesiastes 7:29 says, “***See, this alone I found, that God made man upright***⁵...”⁶

However, free and able as Adam & Eve were to do *good*, they were also free and able to do *evil*!

And so, the state Adam and Eve were in was changeable: they were perfect, but it was possible that they could fall from that perfection!

Thus, before the Fall, man was *able never to sin*.⁷ But he was also *able to sin*!⁸

Yes, Adam & Eve could fall from perfection! And God warned them of that changeability in their status should they disobey Him and eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil. Yes, choosing disobedience would be to choose death (Gn 2:16-17).⁹

Well, you know what happened. Although Adam & Eve had the *freedom of will* (and the *ability*) to please God, they allowed their eyes to look at the forbidden fruit, and their ears

⁴ Modern English Standard Version (MESV)

⁵ In Hebrew, *yāshār* (יָשָׁר), straight, right, upright, just (cf. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). [Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) (p. 449). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ec 7:29). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁷ Augustine of Hippo used the words: “*posse non peccare*,” which is the Latin for “able not to sin.”

⁸ Augustine of Hippo used the words: “*posse peccare*,” which is the Latin for “able to sin.”

⁹ Gn 2:16-17, ***And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”***

to be filled by the smooth talk of satan! So, here's where their *will* came in: they chose evil! As someone has said, "They willed what they should never have even thought!"¹⁰ So, as the Ecclesiast continues to say (in Eccl 7:29), "... *God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.*"¹¹

What's the result of Adam & Eve's sad choice?

Well, that the whole world is groaning and longing for the day of our Lord Jesus!¹²

Well, so far re the will of man before the Fall!

Here is point 2...

The Will of Fallen Man

Question: Did man after the Fall lose his free will? Is fallen man unable to make choices freely by himself?

The answer is yes and no!

- No, fallen man has *not* lost his ability to choose to do anything good!
- But, yes, fallen man *has* lost his ability to, in & of himself, choose anything good *unto his eternal salvation!*

Let's first contemplate the "no" answer – no, fallen man has not lost his ability to choose to do anything good!

My brother & sister, it's not as if fallen man can only sin all the time. I mean, after the Fall, Adam & Eve argued with one another – even in the sense that, before God, Adam blamed Eve for his own sin. But look, even though Adam & Eve might well have argued with one another, they did not go so far as to kill one another!

Also, today, when we look at fallen man, it's not as if all their actions are only sin all the time! No, fallen man can still exercise his will to *go* when the traffic light is green, and to *stop* when the light is red!

By the mercy of God, fallen man can still choose freely do also many other good things like, e.g. rescuing someone from an accident scene or donating money to alleviate the misery of people in war-torn parts of the world! Theologians call such good deeds, "Deeds of Civic Virtue."

Thus, indeed, by the mercy of God, fallen man has not lost his ability to do anything good!

But here is where fallen man has lost his freedom of choosing: to in & of himself *choose any spiritual good that accompanies salvation.*¹³

It used to be natural for Adam & Eve to please God, but now it's natural for fallen men, women & children to have an aversion to pleasing Him!

In Rm 3, the Apostle Paul gives a very poignant description of fallen man's inability to please and seek the only true God. He says (in Rm 3:10-11) ...

"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good,

¹⁰ Van Dixhoorn (ibid:139)

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ec 7:29). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹² Cf. Rm 8:22-23 ***For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.***

¹³ From the WCF 9.3

not even one."¹⁴

Wow! It sounds as sombre as a funeral atmosphere!

And, in a way, that's exactly what it is! I mean, does the Apostle Paul not say about fallen man – yes, about those who have not received Christ as their Saviour & Lord – that they are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1, 5)?¹⁵

Dear Wainui member (Dear young person), scary thought: if you and I have not received Jesus as our Saviour & Lord, then we, too, are dead!

And please think with me: Who is able to change him/herself into something that God would deem worthy to save? Who is able to prepare his/her own heart to receive God's grace?

Not you! Not I! No-one!!

You see, twice (in Jn 6) Jesus Himself says, "***No one can come to Me unless the Father... draws (or has enabled) him!***"¹⁶

You ask, "But, Pastor, why is it so that no one can in/of himself choose for Jesus?"

Well, the Apostle Paul gives the reason: "***The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned***" (1 Cor 2:14).

See why the WCF 9.3 says, "*Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has completely lost all ability to choose any spiritual good that accompanies salvation. Therefore, an unregenerate man, because he is opposed to that good and is dead in sin, is unable by his own strength to convert himself or to prepare himself to be converted*"?

See? When/If someone receives Christ as his/her Lord and Saviour, it only ever happens by God's grace through faith and that not of ourselves! It's the gift of God so that no one should boast!¹⁷

Young person (Children), how does God work that faith in your heart?

Well, by His Holy Spirit!

And how does the Holy Spirit move your heart to receiving Jesus?

By Scripture reading!

Wow! If that's the case (and it is!!), then can you see why I always urge you to regularly read your Bible – yes, not to neglect your own private devotions!?

¹⁴ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ro 3:10–12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁵ Eph 2:1-5, "***As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved***" (Emphasis mine).

Also cf. Col 1:13 "***When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins...***" (Emphasis mine).

¹⁶ Cf. Jn 6:44 ***No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.***

Jn 6:65 ***He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him."***

¹⁷ Cf. Eph 2:8-9 ***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.***

Well, so far re Point 2: “The Will of Fallen Man,” – that will which, mercifully, is still free to choose to do every-day-good-things, yet not free to in/of himself choose for God through Jesus Christ!
Here is point 3...

The Will of the Converted Sinner

My brother & sister, as God delivers us by His grace alone, He changes our characters. And what do we find?

Well, we find that what Paul writes in Phil 2:13 becomes true of us, i.e. that we experience how God is *working in us to will and to work for His good pleasure!*¹⁸ What’s more, we find ourselves increasingly happy to have this new will and to do this new work!!

Well, here’s a beauty! You see, as the Apostle Paul describes the lives of converted sinners (of those who are in Jesus Christ), he says that they have become *slaves of righteousness*, and that they have been set free from sin and have become *slaves of God* (Rm 6:18 & 22).¹⁹

Now, when Paul uses the word *slaves*, he does not mean that we slave for God *against our will!*

Not at all!

You see, God does not force the Christian to serve Him against his/her will! No! The person whom God has so powerfully and effectually drawn to Jesus Christ,²⁰ is the person whose *heart* God has changed! And now that you are in Christ – and you love Him – God *has changed the disposition of your heart* so that you do what...? Well, so that you now *willingly and joyfully* endeavour to serve God on His terms and for His glory!

Look, is that not why the WCF 9.4 says, “*When God converts a sinner and brings him into the state of grace, he frees him from his natural bondage to sin, and by his grace alone he enables him freely to will and to do what is spiritually good...*”²¹

Beautiful!!

But is that what you & I always do? Do you & I always serve our Heavenly Father joyfully, all our days!?

Sadly, no!

That’s why WCF 9.4 continues to say about the converted sinner, “...*Yet, because of his remaining corruption, he does not perfectly nor only will what is good, but also wills what is evil.*”²²

Where does the WCF get this from?

Well from Gal 5:17 where Paul says, “*For the desires of the flesh (sinful nature)²³ are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh (sinful nature), for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*”¹⁸

¹⁸ Phil 2:12-13 *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure* (ESV, emphasis mine).

¹⁹ Rm 6:17-18 & 22 *But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ... But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life* (Emphasis mine).

²⁰ Again, Jn 6:44 & 65!

²¹ MESV (Emphasis mine).

²² MESV (Emphasis mine).

²³ So the NIV1984, because Paul often used the Greek word *sarks* (σάρξ) in the meaning of “sinful/human nature.” “σάρξ, σαρκός *f*: human nature, particularly in reference to the physical aspect of human life— ‘human nature, physical nature of people.’ κατὰ σάρκα γενένηται ‘was born in accordance with the physical

Our NT passage (Rm 7:15-23) also reminds us that, although you & I are in Christ (insofar as we are), we still do not *perfectly will what is good, but also will what is evil*,²⁴ because *what we want to do we do not do, but what we hate we do!*²⁵

So, you & I, although we have our new nature (literally, *new man*), we're still struggling to shed our old nature (*old man*)!²⁶

Again, remember that we're like a snake that tries to shed its old skin which is still clinging onto its body! But here's the difference: in this life, the snake will manage to fully shed its old skin, but the Christian will only fully shed his/her old nature when we pass into glory!

Well that was point 3: "The Will of the Converted Sinner," who is now free to do what is good, but, sadly, is also still free to will what is evil; and finds himself in an ongoing struggle!

Here is the last point...

The Will of Man in Glory

What will bring a final end the Christian's struggle with sin?

Well, when our life on earth is over and God takes us home, and we are in the state of glory!

And how absolutely wonderful that will be when our characters will be perfected!

It's then when Christian men, women and children will experience that their wills are forever free to do good alone!

Remember what Paul says (in Eph 4:13), "...*we will... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*"²⁷

Yes, it's then that all who have received Jesus in faith, will be perfect!²⁸

And, talking of perfection, that's when also our *wills* will be perfected!

Do you and I know exactly what we will be like in heaven?

No!

After all, the Apostle John says (in 1 Jn 3:2), "...*what we will be has not yet been made known.*" However, John continues to say, "*But we know that when he (Jesus) appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*"²⁹

aspect of human nature' Ga 4:23. In some languages one may more appropriately translate this phrase in Ga 4:23 as 'was born like any person is' or 'was born like people are normally born'" (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [*Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 586). New York: United Bible Societies).

²⁴ To use again the final words of WCF 9.4

²⁵ Cf. Rm 7:15b, "*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.*" (NIV1984).

²⁶ For the two natures, cf. Eph 4:22-24 *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self (τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον), which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self (τὸν καινὸν ἄνθρωπον), created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness* (NIV1984, Emphasis mine).

²⁷ Cf. Eph 4:11-13, *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* (NIV1984, Emphasis mine).

²⁸ Cf. Heb 12:23b, "...*You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect...*" (Emphasis mine).

²⁹ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (1 Jn 3:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Dear Wainui member (Dear young person & child), have you received Jesus as your Saviour? Is He your Lord?

You say “yes”?

Well, be glad, for then He will *present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy!*³⁰

AMEN (2471 words excluding footnotes)

³⁰ Cf. Jude verses 24-25, “**To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen**” (NIV1984).