

WHAT ABOUT FREE WILL?

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Matthew 11:25-30

Romans 7:15-25a

Today I am continuing my summer sermon series on Paul's letter to the Romans. I've been drawing from a book called, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, by Fleming Rutledge.

When I was growing up, the Methodist church in our small town was just two doors down from the Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterians permitted us Methodists to use their fellowship hall as one of the classrooms for Vacation Bible School each July, and it was in that connection that I first entered a Presbyterian church. I must have been in the 5th or 6th grade at the time, and I remember asking one of the adults what made Presbyterians different from Methodists. She told me that Presbyterians believed in predestination—a word I hadn't heard before. Predestination, she explained, meant that nobody had any freedom, everything was figured out for you ahead of time and there wasn't anything you could do about it.

Much later, in seminary, I studied the Westminster Confession of Faith—which was for many years *the* confessional standard of American Presbyterians. And, sure enough, I found that a key element of the Westminster Confession is the doctrine of “double predestination. It reads: “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.”¹ The presumption is that Presbyterians are among the “elect,” the folks God has predestined for salvation and eternal life.

These days, we Presbyterians don't talk much about predestination. When it comes up—as it does sometimes in new member classes—I find most people have great trouble with the idea. I think it offends our modern American notions of individuality and fair play. We like to think everyone has the opportunity to choose to live a virtuous life, to work hard, to make something of him- or herself. We believe in Free Will. The human decision, the human choice is central to our form of government and our market economy and the national identity of independence we celebrate this weekend.

Of course, many passages of Scripture suggest that our human choices are less significant than God's choices when it comes to matters of salvation. Perhaps you will remember what Jesus says to the disciples in the Gospel of John: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.”²

Well, God may choose us, we protest, but isn't it then up to us to decide whether to accept God's choice of us or not? So the emphasis is back on us again; the action

¹ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), pt. 1, Book of Confessions*, (Louisville, Office of the General Assembly, 1996), rubric 6.016.

² John 15:14.

moves away from God. God is no longer the subject of the sentence; we are. Our decision, our choice, becomes the center of attention.

But listen again to what St. Paul says about this in this morning's lesson from Romans. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. . . ."

Paul is describing a war that goes on in the human being all the time. William Faulkner, in his Nobel Prize speech, said that the most important subject of literature was "the human heart in conflict with itself." After Paul, the person who best described this situation was the 4th Century bishop, St. Augustine of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine uses the example of the mind giving the body an order: for example, the order to the hand to move. The hand moves so rapidly that there is no distinction between the command and the execution of it. When the mind commands the will to do something, however, the will does not obey. Think about it. Have you tried to stay on a diet? Have you tried to control your temper? Have you vowed not to go over your credit card limit? Have you resolved to do your exercises faithfully? Have you told yourself not to be resentful of others' success? Have people said to you, "Get over it!" when you know you can't? The list goes on.

I can decide to do good, but this force within me that Paul calls "sin" is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.³ The good that I would do is not what I do. Augustine concludes, "The enemy held my will, and he made a chain of it and bound me by it—by my own iron will."⁴

So Paul and Augustine both depict a conflict in which every individual is caught, unable to gain mastery over the forces at war within himself. The more supposed "choices" we have, the more we are deceived about this. Too much "choice" is bad for us. Years ago, I used to go to the store and buy either French's mustard or Gulden's mustard—two choices. Now I go to the store to buy mustard and I am confronted by fifty different kinds of mustard. My anxiety level rises. Should I learn more about mustard? Somebody else out there knows more about mustard than I do. Choosing among mustards may make us feel free for a moment, but it is only an illusion of freedom. I can choose a mustard, but I can't seem to make myself go to the gym three times a week.

Whatever you may think of Sigmund Freud, there is no going back on his major discoveries about the power of the unconscious. People do things without having any idea why they are doing them. We pursue destructive courses for reasons deeply buried in our psyches from long years before. Someone will say of another person, "He is his own worst enemy," not realizing that we are all our own worst enemies. It's just that it's more obvious with some people than others.

Martin Luther, following Augustine and Paul, wrote about the bondage of the will. American Christians don't like this train of thought. If we grant that our wills are

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 2044.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, Chapter 10.

impotent, it seems as if we're giving away something absolutely fundamental. Isn't making the right choices the very basis of the moral life? If we have no capacity to choose the right thing, doesn't that make us robots, mere puppets?

Yes, if we are left to our own devices. But we are not alone. We are not powerless. Aid has come to us from a power outside ourselves: the power of God that overcomes the Power of Sin and Death, working within the human heart to make us new, to make us whole. That is how we find ourselves free, free to follow with an unburdened heart what has already been determined for us: the life lived in love and service following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the second volume of C. S. Lewis's space fantasy, *Perelandra*, the main character, Ransom, has to make a decision. Is he going to engage Satan in hand-to-hand combat, or not? The freedom of the unfallen planet Venus depends on it, but Ransom may fall into Hell as a result. He struggles with his decision. Suddenly [Lewis writes]

. . . there had arisen before him, with perfect certitude, the knowledge [that] "about this time tomorrow you will have done the impossible" . . . The future act stood there, fixed and unaltered as if he had already performed it. . . *You might say, if you liked, that the power of choice had been simply set aside and an inflexible destiny substituted for it. On the other hand, you might say that he had been delivered from the rhetoric of his passions and had emerged into unassailable freedom.* Ransom could not, for the life of him, see any difference between these two statements. *Predestination and freedom were apparently identical.* He could no longer see any meaning in the many arguments he had heard on this subject.⁵

Predestination and freedom were apparently identical. That is the Christian gospel.

It is amazing how strongly we resist this glorious message. Here is a verse from Philippians which expresses it exactly. You have heard the first half of this verse many times, because we prefer it; rarely do we hear the all-important second half. Listen closely to the way the second half of the verse gives the meaning for the first half: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."⁶

Whose will would you rather have, your will or God's will? Your choice, or God's choice? What do we say in the Lord's prayer—"thy kingdom come, thy will be done"? Do we mean that? No, we don't, not left to ourselves we don't. As we sometimes confess together, "We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts." But we are not left to our own devices. Romans 7 is followed by Romans 8, where it says: "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death."⁷

This is pure Christian doctrine right out of Romans 7 and 8. The sad story has happened to everybody. Sin and Death decide things for us. We have no will left in the matter. But "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan, paperback edition, 1965), 149.

⁶ Philippians 2:12-13.

⁷ Romans 8:2.

and death.” And what this means is that in Christ there is a new will for those whose will is in bondage. This is the heart of the new story that is written in the Cross of Christ.

Now if my past experience is any guide, some of you listening today will continue to cling to the doctrine of Free Will. Some of you will even feel angry. You will say that any talk of God’s will overriding our own will violates your personhood and robs us of the capacity to act. But there are others among you who by the grace of God recognize that you, too, not just other people, are unable to change yourself by yourself. You know you need help, you know you need aid, you know you need to be reshaped and you are not ashamed to say so. That is not weakness, it is power—because it is the power of God. You will see that when your own “power of choice has been set aside,” you are then aligned with that “other point of power.” You will find that your security lies in the great history of God’s purpose, and it is a source of “sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort.”

But being comforted is only the half of it. Trusting that the power of God is at work within you, you can go forward with confidence to do those good works that God has prepared for you to walk in. Then truly, you can do great things that you thought you could never do. You can visit a prison, mentor a child, forgive your spouse, fight against prejudice, change an attitude, reach out to an enemy, oppose a wrong—not in order to gain credit or shore up your self-esteem, but because God is working his purpose out in your very own life. *For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.*

God helps those who help themselves? This is the gospel that many like to inflict on others. But is it a gospel? Is it good news? Which do you prefer? What about “help of the helpless, O abide with me”?

You choose.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.