

Series: God Saves #1424

Title: Romans 8.29b

Natural Ability & Moral Ability

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world. Those of you with us last time will get this question: what did *you* have for dinner last night? Did my choice of Indian cuisine influence you in any way? By the way, I did order quite a few dishes from our favorite Indian restaurant and very much enjoyed my meal, grateful as always for the Lord's provision of food and good food. This matter of what to have for dinner came up as a practical example of the ability of the human will to make decisions based on certain choices. I willed Indian food onto my plate last night.

The main point from yesterday was that the human will is *not* neutral. Our will, no person's will, *will* allow us to make choices totally independent of outside influences. Our will is prejudiced, inclined, and disposed in a certain direction when we come to any choice or decision. Having reminded you of this, let me, briefly, also remind you of Jonathan Edwards' definition of the will. We are going to need this, because then Edwards will expand his definition.

Edwards, in his book *The Freedom of the Will*, defines the will as "the mind choosing." The will chooses whatever the mind approves or rejects. And he connects the will also to desire. Quoting now, "A man never, in any instance, wills anything contrary to his desires, or desires anything contrary to his will (*The Freedom of the Will*, 139)." What he is saying is that desire motivates the choice. Desire is the reason for the choice. We choose according to our desires. Our choices are determined by our desires. Put another way: the will always chooses according to its strongest inclination at the moment.

Think about this as related to our sin. As Christians we have a deep desire in our lives to please Christ. We want to obey Him in all of life. He is our Lord and Master and we His servant-slaves. When Jesus says, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments," with our whole being we connect to these words. We do love Him and therefore we want to keep His commandments. *Until* we are faced with some temptation to sin, and then we do not want to obey Christ anymore. We want to commit sin. Our desire motivates our choice. If our strongest inclination in the moment is to sin, then we will sin. Because if our strongest inclination in the moment had been to obey Christ, then we would not have sinned.

Let's use the example of a Christian man who has sinned and taken up an extra-marital affair with a woman who is not his wife. He engages in sexual relations with this woman, but immediately feels a huge weight of guilt so he swears to himself and to God that he will never, ever do that again. And this man returns to his wife and family and for a period of several weeks he is doing well. He has not called his mistress. He has ignored her text messages. He has been faithful to his wife. He has confessed his sin, privately, to Christ and sought forgiveness. In these moments his strongest inclination is to uphold the sanctity of his marriage. His desire is to be faithful to his wife. So, his current desire motivates his choice.

But then, one night he gets into a strong disagreement with his spouse. He is angry and tired and fed up. And he is going to sleep in the couch because he has not cooled down from the argument. Just then, he looks over at his phone and the other woman he's been sleeping with has texted him, begging to get together. Now, in that moment his strongest inclination is to sin again. He grabs his jacket and car keys and leaves the house, driving to their rendezvous point for extra marital sex. Again, his desire motivated his choice. His will is his mind choosing. He has chosen (poorly), but he has chosen according to his desires. This is tragic, but this is the human free will at work.

This man may indeed love Christ and wants to please Christ, but in those moments, on that night, his desire for sin is greater than his desire for sanctification. And you say, "Well, that's an extreme example." Is it? Or, if it is, then you apply whatever your sin is to the point I am making about how the will is *not* neutral. The will is under the command of the mind. And we always choose what we want. We always choose what we want. And later we will see how what humans always want is *to sin!*

RC Sproul, in his reflections on the writing of Jonathan Edwards, points out that Edwards adds a distinction that is helpful for us. That is, Edwards makes a distinction between natural ability and moral ability. (Natural ability and moral ability.) What does he mean? Well, examples of our natural ability, given to us by God, is our ability to think, to walk, to talk, to see, to hear, and above all, to make choices. God has given us the natural ability to make choices. That is what we use our mind and our will for: we choose. But what about moral ability? Do we have, on our own, naturally the moral ability to please God? Edwards, correctly, answers *no*.

And Sproul affirms what Edwards concludes as follows, quote, “Edwards declared that man’s problem with sin lies with his moral ability, or lack thereof. Before a person can make a choice which is pleasing to God, he must first have a desire to please God...Before we can choose Christ, we must first have a desire for Christ. The sum and substance of the whole debate on predestination rests squarely on this point: does fallen man [and woman], in and of [themselves], have a natural desire for Christ?

“Edwards answers this question with an emphatic ‘No!’ He insists that, in the Fall, man lost his original desire for God. When he lost that desire, something happened to his freedom. He lost the moral ability to choose Christ (*Chosen By God*, 192).” I will close quotes there and come back to Sproul in a few moments, but let me just make sure you capture what he’s saying. In the Fall, in the Garden in Eden, when Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, when they sinned, in that moment they lost their original desire for God. And then, because Adam’s sin was imputed to all who follow Adam, because we are all natural born sinners, we also (naturally) have no desire to please God. We have no natural desire for Christ. Instead, our natural desire is to *displease* God; to reject Christ.

It is helpful to quote Sproul again, “In order to choose Christ, the sinner must first have a desire to choose Christ. Either he has that desire already within him or he must receive that desire from God. Edwards and all who embrace [his] view of predestination agree that if God does not plant that desire in the human heart nobody, left to themselves, will ever freely choose Christ. They will always and everywhere reject the gospel, precisely because they do not desire the gospel. They will always and everywhere reject Christ because they do not desire Christ. They will freely reject Christ in the sense that they will act according to their desires (192).” End of quote.

The point here is: *unless God* proactively changes our desire, we will never have the moral ability to choose to love and obey the Lord Jesus Christ. I have some news for many of you Christians tuning in: you, in and of yourself, using your moral ability did not ever freely choose Christ. Rather, it is that Christ chose you and God so transformed your will, gifting to you the desire for Christ, that when Jesus came calling, you answered positively and began following Him. You nor I had the natural desire for Christ. God had to plant the desire for Jesus in our heart and soul before we would ever be Christ’s people.

And, God does *not* do this for everybody. God only predestines certain people for salvation. God only chooses certain individuals and transforms their will, gifting them a desire to be Christ’s disciple. And you might say, “This raises some questions for me!” To which I say, me too. But we will leave those questions (and answers) for another day. For now, I hope you have captured what Edwards is saying about the distinction between natural ability and moral ability. Unless we have a disability, all of us can walk and talk and see and hear. And of course, all of us can make choices. That is natural ability.

But, then there is moral ability. And in the Fall we lost our moral ability to choose Christ. Therefore, if anyone is going to choose to believe *in* Christ, God will have to act. God will have to do something to our free will. And we *will* continue this tomorrow right here on God Is!

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