

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Dr. Spencer, we ended last time in the middle of discussing different evangelical positions regarding salvation. How would like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the fundamental question we were dealing with at the end of our last session was whether or not every person has equal ability to accept or reject God's offer of salvation and I want to state and defend the proper biblical answer to that question. Lutherans and Arminians would say that everyone does have equal ability to accept or reject God's offer of salvation, but the reformed – and I would say biblical – position is that an unregenerate person cannot accept the offer and a regenerate person cannot reject the offer.

We've talked about how people make choices a number of times in these podcasts, most notably in Session 84, where I presented Jonathan Edwards' view, which I think is correct. In that session I paraphrased his view as being that we always do that which we most want to do at any given moment, but limited, of course, to those things which we are able to do.

Marc Roby: And I remember from that discussion that we are limited not only by obvious physical limitations but also by our own nature.

Dr. Spencer: And that is the limitation that matters in the current context. Theologians often refer to this constrained view of free will as free agency. As we noted in Session 126, an unregenerate person is an enemy of God and has no desire for God, so it would be contrary to his nature to accept God's offer of salvation and he is, therefore, incapable of doing so. J.I. Packer has a wonderful short presentation on this topic in his book *Concise Theology*.¹

On the other hand, if a person is born again, his fundamental nature has been changed so that he has a desire for God and, therefore, he is incapable of rejecting God's offer of salvation.

Marc Roby: Which is the doctrine often called Irresistible Grace.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. But if we look at the Lutheran and Arminian position, it seems to be logically inescapable that if every person has equal ability to accept or reject God's offer of salvation, then those who are saved can take some credit for their salvation. Whether we word it negatively and say that only those who ultimately reject the offer will go unsaved, or we put it positively and say that only those who accept the offer will be saved, at the end of day, if everyone is equally capable of making either choice, then the deciding factor in terms of who is saved and who isn't resides in man.

Marc Roby: And why exactly is that a problem?

Dr. Spencer: I can see three ways in which that is a problem. First, it ignores the biblical doctrine of Total Depravity. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:1, we "were dead"² in our transgressions and

¹ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1993, pp 85-86

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sins. And dead people don't do anything to help themselves come alive. The great 18th-century theologian, Charles Hodge wrote that "Should Christ pass through a graveyard, and bid one here and another there to come forth, the reason why one was restored to life, and another left in his grave could be sought only in his good pleasure."³

Marc Roby: Well that does make perfect sense, it certainly could not be the case that one set of bones accepted an offer to come to life and another set of bones rejected that same offer!

Dr. Spencer: No, that wouldn't make any sense at all. Dead people don't do anything. And people who are spiritually dead don't do anything that is in concert with the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 we are told that "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."

Marc Roby: And one of the things that comes from the Spirit of God is his offer of salvation.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. I want to remind our listeners of the acrostic TULIP, which stands for the biblical doctrines of Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints. In Session 126 I quoted the theologian R.C. Sproul, who pointed out that if we understand our moral inability to respond to God's offer, which is part of the doctrine of Total Depravity, the rest of the reformed system of salvation, as represented by this acrostic TULIP, logically follows. He wrote that "If one embraces this aspect of the T in TULIP, the rest of the acrostic follows by a resistless logic."⁴ And I would add that Charles Hodge completely agrees. He wrote about this same plan of salvation, which he calls the Pauline or Augustinian scheme, and said, "such is the order of his plan of redemption, that if one of the great truths which it includes be admitted, all the rest must be accepted."⁵

Marc Roby: They are both pointing out that the reformed, or biblical, view of the plan of salvation is completely consistent. What is the second problem you see with the view that every man can either accept or reject God's offer of salvation?

Dr. Spencer: Well, if it were true, it would give us something to be proud of. If we were both equally capable of either accepting or rejecting God's offer of salvation and I were saved and you were not, then whether we say that is because you rejected God's offer or because I accepted it, either way, the bottom line is that I did and it was precisely *that* action of mine that was the reason I was saved and you were not. The difference between us would *not* be solely due to the mercy of God. I would have played a role in my salvation, and not just a little bit part either, I would have played the decisive role in it. But, as we read last time, Paul told us in Ephesians 2:8-

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³ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, vol II, pg. 340

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 128

⁵ C. Hodge, *op. cit.*, pg. 335

9 that “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Marc Roby: Yes, I certainly see that argument. What is the third problem you see with this view?

Dr. Spencer: That it denies God’s absolute sovereignty. If this view is correct, then when the Bible speaks about God’s election, all it can really be referring to is his foreknowledge. According to this view, God knows in advance who will accept his offer and who won’t, so he “elects” those who will accept his offer of salvation.

Marc Roby: That is, of course, exactly how Lutherans and Arminians view the doctrine of election.

Dr. Spencer: It is, but I don’t think it does justice to the biblical data. If that were the case then you wouldn’t expect the Bible to emphasize over and over again God’s sovereign election. But that is exactly what we see all throughout the Scriptures, the clear presentation of the fact that God makes an absolutely free, sovereign choice. This is the doctrine of Unconditional Election.

Marc Roby: Now, Lutherans and Arminians would point to 1 Peter 1:1-2 where Peter addresses his letter, “To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father”.

Dr. Spencer: And that verse is certainly consistent with their view, but it does not teach us that he chose the elect specifically because of his foreknowledge that they would accept his offer. Rather, in context, the term foreknowledge here refers to God’s having loved and chosen certain sinners in eternity past, even before they were born, which is exactly what we are told in Ephesians 1:4-6.

Marc Roby: Let me read those verses. Paul wrote that God chose us in Jesus Christ “before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”

Dr. Spencer: Notice that in these verses we are clearly told that our predestination to be adopted as God’s sons, which is referring again to our being saved, was “in accordance with his pleasure and will”, which is emphasizing God’s freedom in this choice. And we are also told that the choice was “to the praise of his glorious grace”, and we know that grace is unmerited favor, so that seems to point away from God simply having foreseen our choice. And finally, to put the nail in the coffin, we are told that he has “freely given” us this grace in Christ.

If God gave exactly the same grace to everyone and our salvation depended on our response, then this verse wouldn’t make any sense. It is speaking about a grace that is *not* given to everyone, but only to those whom God predestined in accordance with his own absolutely free and sovereign good pleasure.

Marc Roby: That argument is certainly persuasive. But there are also many more passages in the Bible that support the idea of God’s sovereign election. Can you give us some examples?

Dr. Spencer: Sure. When Paul and Barnabas shared the gospel with the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch, we read in Acts 13:48 that “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.” Then, in speaking about Christ’s second coming, we read in Matthew 24:31 that God “will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” Also, the apostle Paul opens his letter to Titus by writing, “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God’s elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness” (Tit 1:1). There are literally dozens of examples in the New Testament that we could go through, but I don’t want to take that time. I encourage anyone who is really interested to search the New Testament for the words elect, chosen, appointed and so on and see what you find.

Marc Roby: And, interestingly, we even see a reference to elect angels. In 1 Timothy 5:21 Paul told Timothy, “I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is interesting. And God’s free choice in salvation is also foreshadowed by his sovereign choice of Israel to be his covenant people in the Old Testament.

Marc Roby: The classic passage about God’s choosing his people is Deuteronomy 7:7-8, where Moses told the people, “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

Dr. Spencer: And when Moses said that God didn’t choose them because they were more numerous, that is a form of synecdoche, meaning it is a part of something is used to represent the whole. So, rather than listing many of the countless things that a group of people might be proud of, like their numbers, or strength, or wealth, he only lists the one. But the message is clear, he didn’t choose them because of *anything* in them, he chose them simply because he loved them. And that love was not motivated by something worthy in them, and that is the whole point of what Moses says to them. He is telling them to not be proud, God chose them because he chose them, not because they were better than anyone else in any way.

Marc Roby: We also have the famous line in Exodus 33:19 where God tells Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”

Dr. Spencer: Which is a clear statement of God’s sovereignty in providing blessings to men. God doesn’t owe us anything and he does not need to give equally to all of us to treat us justly. He gave us life and we owe him everything. The fact that we have all rebelled against him leaves us justly under his wrath until and unless he chooses to show mercy to us.

Marc Roby: Now, you said earlier that mercy is God's unmerited favor shown to us, but we can make an even stronger statement; God's mercy is his favor being shown to those who deserved his condemnation.

Dr. Spencer: That is an accurate statement. The bottom line in this controversy is that those who say that every man is equally able to accept or reject God's offer of salvation are concerned with preserving a notion of man's freedom of will, often called libertarian free will, that is unbiblical and, I would add, illogical. No sinner will choose God until and unless his sinful nature, which hates God, is changed.

Marc Roby: And God does change the fundamental nature of his elect when he causes us to be born again.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly.

Marc Roby: But it seems to me that you have not yet presented the most obvious and irrefutable biblical evidence for the doctrine of unconditional election.

Dr. Spencer: You're quite right, I've saved the best, or should I say the most difficult, for last.

Marc Roby: It is certainly the most difficult for men to accept.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. And, of course, we are speaking about Chapter 9 of the book of Romans. God clearly tells us in this chapter that our election is not based on anything other than his sovereign choice.

Marc Roby: Let me read from Romans 9:10-13 where God tells us about the patriarch Jacob and his twin brother Esau. Paul wrote, "Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is, as we noted, an extremely difficult passage for people to accept. And when Paul said "Just as it is written", he was referring to the prophet Malachi, who wrote the last book of the Old Testament. We read in Malachi 1:1-3, "An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. 'I have loved you,' says the LORD. 'But you ask, "How have you loved us?" 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' the LORD says. 'Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.'"

Marc Roby: It is very sobering to realize that when the Bible tells us that "God is love", it does not mean that God loves everyone.

Dr. Spencer: It is sobering, and it is difficult, but it is undeniably true. And, as we've seen, it isn't just the Old Testament. God has not changed. And in the passage you read from Romans 9 we were clearly told that God's decision about which of the twins to elect to salvation was made "before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad". I don't know how it is possible

to read that passage and conclude that God simply foresees who will accept or reject his offer of salvation.

And Paul anticipates that people will object to this teaching. In Romans 9:19 he writes, “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’”

Marc Roby: Yes, that is the natural question man wants to ask. How can God blame me for not repenting and believing in Jesus Christ if I am unable to do so?

Dr. Spencer: And God’s answer is not very politically correct. In Verse 20 we read, “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?’””

Marc Roby: I could give a simple paraphrase of God’s answer. He essentially says, “Shut your mouth.”

Dr. Spencer: But he does so while reminding us of the most important distinction there is. He is God, we are creatures. This Creator/creature distinction that we have noted a number of times is absolutely essential to a proper understanding of the Scriptures. We must humble ourselves. We must fear God. We must revere him, worship him, believe him and obey him. To do anything else is to commit cosmic treason. Sin is rebellion against the only true and living God and Creator of all things, and it deserves eternal punishment. God does not have to save anyone. It is absolutely amazing that he chooses to save anyone, especially when you consider the cost.

Marc Roby: In fact, it staggers the mind when you consider that cost. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:18-19, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

Dr. Spencer: And although it is admittedly difficult to accept this idea of God’s unconditional election, it is actually a very comforting and marvelous doctrine and once you understand it properly, I don’t think anyone would want it any other way.

Marc Roby: I agree, but we don’t have time enough today to get into it further, so let me wind up our session today by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.