

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's communicable attributes. Today we are going to look at God's will. Dr. Spencer, this is an extremely difficult and important topic. How would you like to start?

Dr. Spencer: I want to start by defining what we mean by the will.

Marc Roby: That sounds like a good thing to do. And perhaps we could start off with a dictionary definition of the noun "will". If I look in my Webster's dictionary, probably the definition most appropriate to this discussion is that the will is the act of choosing or determining.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Spencer: That's a fairly good short definition. Charles Hodge defines the will as the power, or faculty, of self-determination.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is the ability to make decisions about what to do.

Marc Roby: Of course, we don't always have the power to carry out what we decide to do.

Dr. Spencer: No, we don't. And that's a critical difference between us and God. Whatever God ultimately decides to do will, in fact, be done. We read in Proverbs 19:21 that "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails."<sup>3</sup> And, in Isaiah 55:10-11 God tells us, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." God's will, expressed through his powerful word, is always efficacious.

Marc Roby: And we are again confronted by the Creator/creature distinction.

Dr. Spencer: That we are. And Hodge goes on to say that "The will is not only an essential attribute of our spiritual being, but it is the necessary condition of our personality. Without the power of rational self-determination we should be as much a mere force as electricity, or magnetism, or the principle of vegetable life. It is, therefore, to degrade God below the sphere of being which we ourselves occupy, as rational creatures, to deny to Him the power of self-determination; of acting or not acting, according to his own good pleasure."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Webster's Third New International Dictionary, unabridged, Merriam-Webster Inc., 2002, pg. 2617, definition 3a.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. I, pp 402-403, the definition I am giving here is what he says is generally used "In our day" (he wrote in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) and what he says is the definition actually used in practice ("in the prosecution of the subject") by theologians.

<sup>3</sup> All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

<sup>4</sup> Hodge, op. cit., Vol. I, pg. 403

Marc Roby: That's an important point. God reveals himself to be a personal God, not an impersonal force as is sometimes imagined.

Dr. Spencer: And because God's will is efficacious as we noted a minute ago, John Frame says that "a simple but accurate definition" is that "God's will is anything he wants to happen." Or that "God's will is what pleases him."

Marc Roby: Saying both that God's will is what pleases him and that it is efficacious immediately raises a theological problem. In 2 Peter 3:9 we read that "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." So, if God's will is efficacious, and he wants everyone to come to repentance, it would seem reasonable to conclude that everyone will, ultimately, be saved. But the Bible clearly teaches that not everyone is saved. How do you handle that problem?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we have to be more careful in defining and talking about the will. When we use the word "will" we mean different things at different times. Now this discussion will take a while, but we'll get back to God's will later. Let me give a human example to explain what I mean.

Marc Roby: Okay, please do.

Dr. Spencer: Suppose it's a really cold, rainy miserable Saturday in January here in California and I'm watching a golf tournament on TV that is being played in Hawaii, where it is at that time sunny and beautiful. I might be prompted to say something like, "Boy, I wish I was there instead of here." Now the question I want to ask is whether that expression is a true statement of my desires.

Marc Roby: It would certainly be understandable if it were.

Dr. Spencer: And in one sense it might genuinely be my desire. It *would*, in fact, be more pleasant to be there at that particular moment. But then you have to back up and think about it a bit. I have the financial wherewithal to travel to Hawaii and the poor weather was most likely predicted in advance. Therefore, if being in Hawaii on that Saturday was really and truly what I desired most, I could have been there. We can conclude, therefore, that my statement of desire, while genuine, was not the final judgment I made on the matter. When all of the factors were taken into account my greatest desire was to be right where I was.

Marc Roby: I see your point.

Dr. Spencer: The great theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote that "*It is that motive, which, as it stands in the view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the Will.*"<sup>5</sup> To put it more colloquially, his thesis, which he defends quite convincingly, is that we do exactly that which we

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<sup>5</sup> J. Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, which is supposed to be essential to moral agency, virtue and vice, reward and punishment, praise and blame*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Hendrickson Publishers, 2005, Vol. I. pg. 5

most want to do at any given moment, but limited, of course, to those things which we are able to do.

**Marc Roby: I think most people would balk at the idea that they always do what they most want to do. There are many examples of things we do that we would rarely say are what we most want to do at the moment. Like go to work in the morning, or do physical exercise, or refrain from eating a second piece of cake and so on.**

Dr. Spencer: I had exactly that sort of objection when I first heard this idea as well, but the objection doesn't stand up under careful scrutiny. Let's examine the examples you gave. We have all experienced waking up in the morning, looking at the clock and just wishing that the day would go away. The last thing we want to do is get up and go to work, or school if we're younger. We don't need to go into all the reasons why we might feel that way on any given day, I'm pretty sure that all of our listeners can relate to the sentiment.

**Marc Roby: I certainly know that I can. And I could give you a good list of reasons if you like.**

Dr. Spencer: Well, let's save those for another discussion. But given that we sometimes feel that way, and recognizing that we occasionally do give in to those sinful inclinations and stay home, why do we usually get up and go to work or school anyway? The answer is that when we consider all of our available options, getting up and going to school or work is actually what we most want to do!

For example, consider work. I know that if I don't get up and go to work, I'm going to have to give some explanation to my boss. And if that happens very often, I'm going to lose my job. If I lose my job, I can't pay my rent, can't buy my groceries and so on. If I have a family, there are others who will be affected as well. So, when I consider all of these factors, the thing I actually want to do most is get up and go to work.

**Marc Roby: Unfortunately, I see your point. Perhaps a simple way to put it is to use the common expression "all things being equal". In other words, all things being equal, I would rather not get up and go into work, but all things are not equal. There are unpleasant consequences that would result from not going to work.**

Dr. Spencer: That is a good way to put it. It is virtually never true that all other things will work out the same independent of my decisions. Decisions have consequences, and those consequences are considered as part of the process our minds go through in deciding what we most want to do at the moment. I suppose you could say that is a mild form of coercion, but whether you think about it that way or not, it is reality. Even if we lived in a world where we didn't have to work, there would still be constraints. If I wanted to eat something, I'd have to get up and go get it. Or, even in some future world with super capable robot servants, I would at least have to tell the robot what it is I want it to bring me.

**Marc Roby: I think I might like that future world.**

Dr. Spencer: There are times when we all would. But let's look at the second thing you listed that people do, but usually don't say they enjoy, getting physical exercise. There are again

consequences for neglecting the task. And let's link it with the third thing you mentioned, refraining from eating a second piece of cake. If we just eat all that we want to eat and don't get any exercise, we all know what the result will be. We will get more and more overweight and over time will develop a number of health problems related to our inactivity and weight and these things will make our lives less enjoyable. Now, it's obvious from looking at people that different individuals choose different levels of physical fitness, so not everyone decides on the same balance between momentary pleasure and long-term health.

**Marc Roby: And there are huge variations in people's natural metabolisms and body types that contribute to the differences as well.**

Dr. Spencer: That's all true. But Edwards' point is valid. All things considered, we do that which we most want to do at any given moment.

**Marc Roby: Now, of course, most of our decisions are not carefully thought out, so we can't really say we sit down and think all of this through every time we decide whether or not to eat a second piece of cake.**

Dr. Spencer: Of course not, we are all creatures of habit. But if we are adults we hopefully think about our behavior and work to change bad habits, so even snap decisions are really the result of our underlying priorities and thought. It's also true that we don't always consider all of the consequences of our actions as carefully as we should, which can bring us trouble. But, ultimately, all of these things are free choices we make and my only point is that when we say we are doing something we don't want to do, that isn't really completely true. Unless we are being physically forced, we are, in fact, doing what we most want to do. It's just that our decision is being influenced by other factors so that our choice is not always the one that maximizes our immediate pleasure. So, when I say these are free choices, I mean that they are free only in the sense that no one is physically forcing us. No decisions are free in the sense of having absolutely no consequences or causes.

**Marc Roby: We've gotten pretty far away from the theological problem we were addressing. How does all of this tie back in to understanding how God's will can be efficacious, and that he can want everyone to come to repentance, and yet not have everyone actually come to repentance?**

Dr. Spencer: What we've been talking about with human beings applies directly. God reveals himself to us in terms that we can understand. Therefore, just as I can truthfully say that I would like to have a large chocolate milkshake along with my lunch most every day, and yet I freely choose not to, in the same way God can honestly say that he wants everyone to come to repentance and yet not cause that to actually come about. God saying that he wants everyone to come to repentance is called his will of disposition;<sup>6</sup> in other words, it tells us something about the inner desires of God.

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<sup>6</sup> e.g., see R.C. Sproul, *Can I Know God's Will?*, Reformation Trust Publishing, 2010, pg. 20 (available for free in pdf form from [https://www.wtsbooks.com/common/pdf\\_links/9781567691795.pdf](https://www.wtsbooks.com/common/pdf_links/9781567691795.pdf))

Marc Roby: We also read in Ezekiel 18:23 that God told the prophet to say to the people, “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. God would, in a sense, be pleased if everyone was saved. But in another sense, he would not because there are consequences that would follow from that decision, which make another course of action more desirable. As I just illustrated by the fact that I don’t drink chocolate milkshakes with lunch very often, we don’t always follow some of our inner desires, and neither does God, because all other things are not equal. What God actually does is called his decretive will<sup>7</sup> because whatever God decrees should happen, does happen.

Marc Roby: Now, in the case of you having the milkshake for lunch every day the undesirable result would be your putting on a bunch of weight you don’t want to carry. But what would the undesirable result be if all people came to repentance? And I should note that this would surely include, as true repentance always does, saving faith and would therefore mean that everyone would go to heaven. How could that be bad?

Dr. Spencer: In and of itself, having everyone go to heaven is *not* bad; in fact, it would be very good, which is why God says that he wants that. But, if he brought every single person to repentance, then he would not justly judge anyone. It must be, as much as we may not like the fact, that the world we actually live in is the one that best fulfills God’s primary purpose of making his own multifaceted glory manifest.

Marc Roby: In other words, God’s ultimate purpose in creating this universe is better served by not having every single person come to repentance and faith, even though, in one sense, such a result would be pleasing to him.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. Sin must be punished. And God chose to mercifully save some by punishing his Son in our place, but others he treats with perfect justice, which demands their eternal punishment.

Marc Roby: That begs a question though; why not simply create a universe with no sin in the first place? Then there wouldn’t be any need for the just punishment of anyone.

Dr. Spencer: That is a question that people have pondered for many years and even true Christians will give different answers. The most common answer by far in our day is that in order to create beings that are not mere puppets God had to endow us with what is called libertarian free will, which means that our decisions must not be directly caused by anything, even our own character. John Frame puts it this way; “This position assumes that there is a part of human nature that we might call the will, which is independent of every other aspect of our being, and which can, therefore, make a decision contrary to every motivation.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> e.g., see John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 531

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 138

Marc Roby: That view sounds illogical to me. If we don't make decisions on the basis of our own nature, our likes and dislikes, combined with other motives, then how on earth would we make any decision?

Dr. Spencer: I agree that it is illogical. And we will talk about this much more when we get to discussing biblical anthropology, in other words, the Bible's view of man. But to stay on topic with God's will I don't want to go into deeper right now other than to point out that this would ascribe to man more freedom than God himself has! We will talk at length next time about the fact that God is constrained by his own nature; for example, he cannot lie. In other words, even God does not have libertarian free will. And yet, this view is common among those who believe that it is within every man's power to choose whether or not to accept God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: Of course, that view must surely be wrong because it is in opposition to the biblical doctrines of God's decretive will and predestination.

Dr. Spencer: It most certainly is, and we will get to a deeper discussion of those doctrines in later podcasts. But for now, I want to stay on the topic of God's will, and we have talked a lot about man's will only to enable us to define some terms and develop an understanding based on the realm that we are more familiar with.

In any event, the idea that in order to be fully human men must have a libertarian free will is contradicted by the fact that we will not be able to sin in heaven, which Frame correctly calls "the consummate state of human existence"<sup>9</sup>. The existence of heaven proves that God can create a place where sin is impossible and the fact that heaven is held out to us as the ultimate and best possible place, the very home of God, proves that human nature will be at its highest and best form in heaven. Therefore, libertarian free will is clearly not necessary.

Marc Roby: We're almost out of time, so let me summarize what we've discussed so far. We have seen that God's will, like our own, takes into account the consequences of a given action, so that it can simultaneously be true that he would honestly like to see all people be saved, and yet for other reasons he does not, in fact, save all people. We have also seen that the idea that God didn't create a sinless universe because he had to allow human beings libertarian free will in order to prevent our being mere puppets, is not an acceptable explanation because we will not be able to sin when we get to heaven.

Dr. Spencer: That's a good summary. But you could also phrase the last part differently; we will not have the *freedom* to sin when we get to heaven.

Marc Roby: I think we'll have to come to that statement next time and I look forward to that conversation. And, as always, we invite our listeners to email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org) and we will respond.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg. 141