

The Challenges (and Blessings) of Free Will

by David Adams – April 6, 2025

I. God Gives Us Freedom of Choice

a. Read **Deuteronomy 11:13-28**.

i. After all his warnings and admonitions, Moses sets a choice before the people. They can either:

1. *Obey the Lord*, in which case they will receive the blessing promised; OR
2. *Disobey the Lord*, in which case they will be cursed, as warned.

b. This is one of many classic passages (another significant one is in **Deuteronomy 30**) that remind us that the Lord has given us *free choice* in this life: whether we want to follow Him or not.

i. We are made “in the image of God” (**Genesis 1:27**). The early Christians understood that an important component of this is that we have been *created as free moral agents*.

1. We each have the ability to choose right or wrong, good or evil. That did not end with the Fall of Man in **Genesis 3**.

a. Early Christians saw this free will as essential if we were to be truly made “in the image of God”. God Himself has free will (although He always chooses to do good, and never chooses evil).

2. We see in **Deuteronomy 11** that Moses certainly believed we still had free choice, the ability to choose to do what was good, to follow God.

c. Early Christian writers commented on this idea that we have free will (in contrast to what some Greek philosophers and others taught).

i. From Irenaeus, bishop of the church in Lyons, in Gaul, writing c. 180 AD:

1. “CHAP. XXXVII.—MEN ARE POSSESSED OF FREE WILL, AND ENDOWED WITH THE FACULTY OF MAKING A CHOICE. IT IS NOT TRUE, THEREFORE, THAT SOME ARE BY NATURE GOOD, AND OTHERS BAD.

2. “This expression [of our Lord], ‘How often would I have gathered your children together, but you were not willing’,

(**Matthew 23:37**) set forth the ancient law of human liberty, because God made man a free [agent] from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests [commands] of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God, but a good will [towards us] is present with Him continually. And therefore does He give good counsel to all.

3. “And in man, as well as in angels, He has placed the power of choice (for angels are rational beings), so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves. On the other hand, they who have not obeyed shall, with justice, be not found in possession of the good, and shall receive ~~condign~~ punishment: for God did kindly bestow on them what was good; but they themselves did not diligently keep it, nor deem it something precious, but poured contempt upon His super-eminent goodness.
4. “Rejecting therefore the good, and as it were spuing it out, they shall all deservedly incur the just judgment of God, which also the Apostle Paul testifies in his **Epistle to the Romans**, where he says, ‘But do you despise the riches of His goodness, and patience, and long-suffering, being ignorant that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But according to your hardness and impenitent heart, you treasure to yourself wrath against the day of wrath, and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God.’ ‘But glory and honour,’ he says, ‘to every one that doeth good.’ (**Romans 1:4, 5 and 7**)
5. “God therefore has given that which is good, as the apostle tells us in this Epistle, and they who work it shall receive glory and honour, because they have done that which is good when they had it in their power not to do it; but those who do it not shall receive the just judgment of God, because they did not work good when they had it in their power so to do.
6. “But if some had been made by nature bad, and others good, these latter would not be deserving of praise for being good, for such were they created; nor would the former be reprehensible, for thus they were made [originally]. But since all men are of the same nature, able both to hold fast and to do what is good; and, on the other hand, having also the power to cast it from them and not to do it,—some do justly receive praise even among men who are under the control of good

laws (and much more from God), and obtain deserved testimony of their choice of good in general, and of persevering therein; but the others are blamed, and receive a just condemnation, because of their rejection of what is fair and good.

7. "And therefore the prophets used to exhort men to what was good, to act justly and to work righteousness, as I have so largely demonstrated, because it is in our power so to do, and because by excessive negligence we might become forgetful, and thus stand in need of that good counsel which the good God has given us to know by means of the prophets."

- a. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 37; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 518–519)

ii. From Tertullian, preacher in Carthage, North Africa, writing c. 207 AD:

1. "I find, then, that man was by God constituted free, master of his own will and power; indicating the presence of God's image and likeness in him by nothing so well as by this constitution of his nature. For it was not by his face, and by the lineaments [features] of his body, though they were so varied in his human nature, that he expressed his likeness to the form of God; but he showed his stamp in that essence which he derived from God Himself (that is, the spiritual, which answered to the form of God), and in the freedom and power of his will.
2. "This his state was confirmed even by the very law which God then imposed upon him. For a law would not be imposed upon one who had it not in his power to render that obedience which is due to law; nor again, would the penalty of death be threatened against sin, if a contempt of the law were impossible to man in the liberty of his will. So in the Creator's subsequent laws also you will find, when He sets before man good and evil, life and death, that the entire course of discipline is arranged in precepts by God's calling men from sin, and threatening and exhorting them; and this on no other ground than that man is free, with a will either for obedience or resistance.
3. "...Therefore it was proper that (he who is) the image and likeness of God should be formed with a free will and a mastery of himself; so that this very thing—namely, freedom of will and self-command—might be reckoned as the image and likeness of God in him."

- a. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 2, chapters 7-8; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, pp.301-302)
- d. Jesus and the prophets and apostles also show this respect to us, giving us free choice between two alternatives.
 - i. Recall the challenge given by Jesus near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, offering a choice between two alternate gates through which to travel:
 1. “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (**Matthew 7:13-14**, NKJV)
 2. **Question:** Can we imagine a Jesus trying to control people?
 - a. **Answer:** No! This is not God’s way. Some examples:
 - b. The rich young man (**Matthew 19, Mark 10**)
 - i. Jesus gives him a choice to follow him (and give all his possessions to the poor.
 - ii. The young man makes his choice (not to follow) and goes away sad.
 - iii. Jesus does not chase after him!
 - c. Zachaeus, come down from that tree. (**Luke 19**)
 - i. Jesus does not climb up after him, or make him come down!
 - ii. “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.”
 - iii. Because of *his* willingness, *his* response: “Today salvation has come to this house.”
 - d. Woman caught in adultery. (**John 8**)
 - i. “Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”
 - ii. What happened to her? What did she decide? (We don’t really know.)

- iii. But, Jesus did not coerce her to leave her sin.
- e. Calling Peter to follow Him. (**Mark 1**)
 - i. "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men."
(to Peter and Andrew)
 - ii. And again in **John 21:15-19**
 - iii. Jesus calls Peter to follow Him *willingly*. Does NOT force Him.
- ii. Consider the prophet Elijah at the showdown with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. While the people wanted to 'hedge their bets' and not choose sides, Elijah challenged them:
 - 1. "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is god, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." (**1 Kings 18:21**)
 - 2. While we don't coerce, it is certainly a good thing to call people to a decision, like the prophets, like Jesus.
 - 3. But, the prophets and Jesus let the people choose.
- e. **Practical lessons for us.**
 - i. Man is truly a free moral agent, made in the image of God. We have a choice whether to do good or evil. We are not "totally depraved".
 - ii. God is just, all-powerful, and all-knowing, but not coercive. He sends men to warn us, but leaves the choice (and consequences) in our hands, given how we choose to do good or evil, to obey or to disobey.
 - iii. We are called to imitate God in how He deals with us. Recognize that people have free choice. We need to allow people to make their own choices; and enjoy the blessings or consequences.
 - iv. How we see and understand God impacts how we treat others.
 - 1. I have a relative who is making very bad choices that are having an extremely negative impact on those around this person. I can encourage, support, warn, and engage, but I cannot control them.
 - a. Great stress trying to control (and it does not work!)
 - b. Alternatively, we can find peace when we give up our desire to control/coerce.
 - i. Do what I can, be loving, courageous, merciful, truth-telling, lay out consequences for choosing

path A or path B, and let the chips fall where they fall.

2. In parenting.

- a. (We set boundaries and rules when they are young, vulnerable, etc.)
- b. But, as they grow older, we must avoid coercion.
- c. Help children understand early in life that they have choices to make and will face the consequences of those choices. We must allow our children to make choices.
- d. We need to pray for great wisdom in these things!

3. How we preach to non-believers and disciple our brothers and sisters in Christ.

- a. Don't try to control people or be coercive. This is not how God is, and it should not be how we are!
- b. Treat people with respect as free moral agents made in God's image.
- c. It's okay to lay out alternatives, explain to them the consequences of their choices (good or bad), and call them to make a decision, just like the prophets did. However, must allow people the freedom to make their own choices and to accept (and learn from) the consequences, like God does with us.

4. Giving money (to the church or others)

- a. "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (**2 Corinthians 9:7**, ESV)

5. Sacrificing for others

- a. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep... Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself...." (**John 10:11, 17-18**)
- b. Jesus laid down His life; no one forced Him to do it.

- c. “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” (**1 John 3:16**)
 - i. Like Jesus, we are to lay down our own lives, willingly, for others. No one makes us do it.
 - ii. This is love: willing sacrifice (not forced, coerced).

6. Leadership

- a. “...serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly....” (**1 Peter 5:2**)
- b. Serving, leading, sacrificing under compulsion leads to anger, resentment, bitterness toward God/others.
- c. True love is *self-sacrifice*, willingly; each person choosing to give, serve, sacrifice, etc.

f. Read **1 Corinthians 13:4-13**

- i. The love of God. He gave us free will. He allows us to choose.
- ii. There is simply no coercion with God. Consequences indeed, but no coercion.
- iii. God’s love: He loves the truth and never compromises on truth, but He is patient, suffers, and endures.
- iv. I chose Eva, and she chose me. We choose each other every day – faithfulness. This is the same for each of us in our relationship with God. We choose Him. This is what He desires of us, for us to choose Him.