

S T U D Y G U I D E



Willing to Believe

THE CONTROVERSY OVER FREE WILL

by R.C. Sproul



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The Truth Shall Make You Free

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The nature of free will has been at the center of numerous controversies and debates throughout the history of the church. Two issues are central in the debate. The first is the relationship between free will and the sovereignty of God. The second has to do with the effects of the Fall upon man's will. In this lesson, Dr. Sproul introduces the topic of free will and discusses both of these questions.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to explain what Jesus means when He tells the Pharisees that they are "slaves of sin."
2. To understand the basic difference between humanistic notions of free will and the Christian doctrine of free will.
3. To be able to define the two main theological questions involved in the question of free will.

QUOTATIONS

God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined, to good or evil.

—The Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. IX:1

A man is always free in every responsible volition, as much when he chooses, in violation of the law of God and conscience, as in conformity to it.

—A.A. Hodge

LECTURE OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- A. In John 8, Jesus becomes involved in a controversy with the Pharisees over the issue of freedom.
- B. In verse 32, Jesus makes the seemingly innocuous statement “the truth shall make you free.”
- C. The Jews object to the idea that they can be made free because it implies that they are in some kind of captivity.
- D. Jesus tells them that they are slaves of sin who need to be set free.
- E. If there is anything Jesus taught that is widely rejected today, it is the idea that we are by nature slaves of sin.

II. The controversy

- A. The Jews who disagreed with Jesus stood within the Old Testament tradition and knew about the Fall, but their belief system included a pagan understanding of humanity.
- B. They had an exalted view of the inherent goodness of human nature.
- C. The dominant view has continued to be the humanistic doctrine, which teaches that no matter how frequently we may stumble, evil is external to our hearts.
- D. Incredibly, two-thirds of evangelicals polled recently also said that man is basically good.
- E. Christians often blame problems on secular humanism, but Christians have undermined their own cause by embracing a humanist anthropology.
- F. This is largely due to our common notions of free will, ideas that do not come from Scripture but from pagan and humanistic sources.

III. The issue of free will

- A. Fundamentally, the question of free will relates to two distinct theological questions:
 - i. What is the relationship between free will and the sovereignty of God?
 - ii. How did the Fall and original sin affect man’s free will?
- B. The question of the relationship between man’s free will and God’s sovereignty raises questions about determinism—the view that human decisions are determined by an external cause.
 - i. One type of determinism is fatalism. According to fatalism, the destiny of individuals is grimly determined by entities such as the stars.
 - ii. A second type of determinism is naturalistic determinism. According to this position, our decisions are caused by fixed natural causes such as biochemical reactions or external cultural conditioning.
- C. The question of the relationship between the Fall and man’s free will essentially has to do with the extent to which the Fall has influenced our free will.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How did the Pharisees respond to Jesus' statement "the truth shall make you free"?
 - a. They said, "You have a demon."
 - b. They said, "What must we do to be saved?"
 - c. They said, "We have never been in bondage to anyone."
 - d. They tried to stone him.

2. What point was Jesus emphasizing in this dispute with the Pharisees?
 - a. We are slaves of sin
 - b. Truth is relative
 - c. Slavery is a sin
 - d. Truth is unknowable

3. What Old Testament doctrine should have prepared the Jews for Jesus' statement?
 - a. Creation
 - b. The Exile
 - c. The Fall
 - d. The Suffering Servant

4. What has been the dominant view of human nature in history?
 - a. No matter how frequently man may stumble, evil is external to his heart.
 - b. Fallen man is a slave of sin.
 - c. Fallen man has damaged the image of God in which he was created.
 - d. Man is as evil as he possibly can be.

5. What percentage of evangelicals polled claimed to believe that man is basically good?
 - a. A very small percentage
 - b. Two-thirds
 - c. Almost 100 percent
 - d. One-third

6. What teaching asserts that human decisions are determined by an external cause?
 - a. Neo-orthodoxy
 - b. Christianity
 - c. Arminianism
 - d. Determinism

7. According to _____, the destiny of individuals is grimly determined by entities such as the stars.
 - a. Fatalism
 - b. Calvinism
 - c. Naturalistic determinism
 - d. Pelagianism

8. What is the name of the influential twentieth-century determinist that Dr. Sproul mentioned?
 - a. Sigmund Freud
 - b. B.F. Skinner
 - c. Karl Barth
 - d. C.S. Lewis

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read John 8:31–38. What does Jesus say about the relationship between sin and slavery? According to Jesus, what will make a slave free?

2. In John 14:6, what does Jesus declare Himself to be? How does this relate to John 8:31–38?

3. In John 8:33 and 39, the Jews to whom Jesus is speaking place much of their hope in their ancestry. They appeal to their blood relationship to Abraham. How does Jesus respond to this appeal?

4. Read Galatians 3:16. According to Paul, who is the Seed to whom the promises were made? Now read Galatians 3:29. Who else does Paul consider to be Abraham's seed? Upon what is inheritance of the Abrahamic promises now based, according to Paul—ability to trace one's lineage to Abraham or union with Christ?

5. How does Paul reinforce this understanding of the relationship of Jews to the Abrahamic promises in Romans 2:28–29?

6. Read Ephesians 2:11–13. Paul says in these verses that he is addressing Gentiles who have believed in Christ. Paul lists five things that were true of these Gentiles but no longer are true now that they have believed. What are the five things that Paul says characterized the Gentiles' state as unbelievers? Since, according to Paul, the opposites of those five things are now true of the Gentiles, list the five things that are now true of the Gentile believers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to understand that the “truth” to which Jesus refers in John 8 is not merely an abstract conceptual truth?
2. Granting that the Jews to whom Jesus spoke missed His point, why is their claim that they never have been enslaved to anyone ironic? Discuss some ways in which modern Christians could fall into a similar type of self-deception.
3. Modern dispensationalism teaches that the Abrahamic promises still belong exclusively to the physical descendants of Abraham. Is such a doctrine defensible in light of the New Testament teaching in passages such as Galatians 3 and Ephesians 2?
4. Does infant baptism necessarily lead Christians to the same kind of false trust in their physical lineage that the Jews of Jesus’ day expressed? Defend your answer.

APPLICATION

1. Meditate on Jesus’ words in John 8. Consider what it means for you to have been a slave of sin. Consider what it means for God to have adopted you as a son.
2. If you were polled today, would you say that man is basically good? Why is it important for your Christian life to understand that fallen man is not inherently good?
3. Do you ever find yourself lapsing into a pessimistic fatalism? What can you do to avoid that non-Christian attitude?
4. In your prayers, remember to thank God for setting you free, for adopting you as His child, and for giving you a lasting hope.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Sproul, R.C. *Willing to Believe*, pp. 15–27

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