

Headline: What about free will?

Man's free will is one topic that can lead to a heated exchange. But it is also thrilling to see the hearts of believers understand it more fully due to an unbiased and Biblical study. Too often we adopt Christian beliefs without giving them a thorough comparison to what the Bible says. Many passages like 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 1 Corinthians 4:8, and 2 Corinthians 10:5 tell us to examine everything according to God's Word.

Often the free will of man is understood to be incompatible with the truth that God is sovereign over our destiny. So people choose one or the other. However, it's not surprising that when people are asked if they believe in free will they say "yes of course" but when they are asked to define it, they struggle. Clear definitions are necessary for profitable discussion. They help us to distinguish assumption from fact and they bring clarity out of ambiguity.

When it comes to free will, there are basically two levels of meaning or understanding. The most common understanding is that free will is the freedom to make choices. Most believe this includes the responsibility and consequences of those decisions. The freedom to choose is very important because it keeps us from being robots and puppets. But more importantly, it lines up with the creation account.

Genesis 2:15–17 Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. 16 The Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; 17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."

Being created in the image of God means that we are not only capable of making decisions but also that we have the responsibility to do so. In fact, this is what sets us apart from the animal world. So Adam and Eve were given the choice to obey God or to disobey Him. It was in that moment that their will was as free as free will gets.

If our definition of free will ends here, then I would agree that man does in fact have a free will. However, that position is too simplistic. Something is missing; namely, God's sovereignty.

We know the final outcome of Adam and Eve's choice.

They freely chose to disobey and immediately experienced the consequences of their choice, which was exactly what God promised, spiritual death. At that moment a radical change took place. Their nature was altered and suddenly they found themselves in bondage to sin and incapable of freely choosing between righteousness and unrighteousness. Even though they did not lose the freedom of choice, their nature was altered and that brought a new limit to their choices. Now their will and its desires were bound by their new, fallen nature.

Jesus illustrates this in Matthew 7:15-20. He tells us that “good trees” (believers) bear good fruit but “bad trees” produce bad fruit. In other words, trees produce fruit according to their nature. The Lord took that analogy of nature and applied it to the spiritual world. So Jesus is saying that our will can only produce in accord with our base nature.

Ephesians 2:1–3 reminds us that unbelievers experience three oppressive and dictatorial powers. They can’t help but walk in spiritual deadness, nor avoid the influence of culture, and they cannot remove themselves from the power of Satan. Although free to make choices, they are like prisoners that are bound by the constraints of the judicial system. And according to Romans 3:10-11 they don’t have the will to seek or submit to God (Romans 8:7-8).

So, how does God define free will? Romans 6:17-18 makes it very clear that prior to salvation we are owned by sin, so all our choices are unrighteous. Then comes the transition to a new master; righteousness. We are owned by one or the other and our will is not independently free from the one who OWNS us. God also says through the apostle John “the truth will make you free.” In salvation, our will is released from the tyranny of sin and since God is our new owner we are freed to make choices that are consistent with His will. That is genuine free will.