

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2019

Week 17: April 21-27

Do We Have Free Will?

Read: Genesis 50:20; Exodus 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:8; Deuteronomy 2:30; 30:6; 1 Kings 8:56-61; 2 Chronicles 30:12; Psalm 51:10; Proverbs 16:1,9,33; Isaiah 44:18-20; 45:5-7; Jeremiah 24:7; 32:39; Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:26; Matthew 11:25-26; Luke 10:21; John 6:44; 10:27-30; 12:39-40; Acts 13:48; 16:14; 17:26; Romans 2:28-29; 9:16; 11:7; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Ephesians 1:11. Read Romans 9 in full.

This is one of those hot-button questions in the life of the church today, though do understand that this hasn't always been the case. For many years, in the life of the church, it was simply assumed that since God was sovereign over all things, He was sovereign over our individual wills as well. And thus, instead of "free will," the church instead talked about "free agency," and there is a difference between the two notions.

With this in mind, we need to define some terms to ensure we are all talking about the same thing. But before we do that, let me assert a basic principle found in all orthodox Christian circles. The principle is that God is sovereign over all things *and* we are responsible for our actions (otherwise God would not be a just judge). Historically when a person or group rejects one of these two principles, that group is considered to have entered into heresy. Thus, in today's world, the extreme views on this debate — "Hypercalvinism" which rejects human free agency *and* "Process Theology" and "Open Theism" which rejects God's sovereignty — are both considered to be heretical views and thus are not open to be held by Christians.

It is true that there is a point where our explanations of how human responsibility and God's sovereignty work in harmony will break down, but that is not because both are not true and non-contradictory, but it is simply because our ability to reason is limited. It should also be noted that this is one of the main discussions that separates Calvinists from Wesleyan-Arminians, but we will tackle that in a moment, after we set forth some definitions.

Free Agency: This is the historical terminology that has been used by the church. To say that people are "free agents" is to affirm that they are persons capable of taking actions for which they can be held responsible. This affirms that the actions we take and the decisions we make are real decisions and that our interactions with the world are not purely a matter of cause and effect. Agency does not, though, imply that the decisions we make are not influenced by outside forces.

Libertarian Free Will: This is the view that for any decision that you make, you could have made any other possible decision. Further, it implies that there is nothing that can so influence your decisions that you would not be free to choose otherwise. This is typically the view held by Methodists and Free-Will Baptists.

Compatibilist Free Will: This view implies that the decisions that you make are made freely, but in perfect conformity to God's plan and design for you. In other words, the choices you make are compatible with the sovereign plan that God has ordained for you. This is typically the view of Presbyterians, Reformed Churches, and Lutherans.

Determinism: This is the view that all actions you take are determined and that you have no freedom or real choice in the actions you take. This is a form of Fatalism but is typically the view that Muslims are found to have.

Process Theology: This is the Wesleyan view on the free will taken to its extreme, arguing that God is in process with all mankind and that he is little more than a smarter creature acting within history.

Open Theism: This view is similar to Process theology with the exception being that God is said to know all of the possible conclusions to the actions you will take and that he tries to influence events so that the best possible outcome will come to pass. Both Open Theism and Process Theology are considered heretical positions.

Hypercalvinism: Like Process Theology and Open Theism, Hypercalvinism is a heretical position. It's a view that states that since God determines who he will save, then we have no responsibility to evangelize or do good works. In a sense, it is a form of determinism.

Putting it all Together:

There are several major challenges to the view of Libertarian Free Will. The first challenge is that if my will is totally free and cannot be influenced by anyone or anything, then Jesus' death could have been in vain. Further, salvation really relies on me making the right choice. And, if it is up to me to make a choice to believe, then my works contribute to my salvation.

The second challenge has to do with the inspiration of Scripture. If God inspired every word of the Scriptures, then how can it be that the authors of Scripture truly could have Libertarian Freedom? If there was a possibility of them altering the wording (as Libertarian Freedom would suggest), then we could have no confidence that the Scriptures really are "Thus says the Lord."

Probably the most important challenge has to do with the way Jesus speaks about people being brought to salvation. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." That word we translate as "draws" refers to the way a stubborn farm animal is drug to its destination by a determined farmer or the way fishermen pull those fish caught in the net into the boat. In other words, the drawing is forceful and while the one being drawn might resist for a season, they will ultimately go where the master wants them to go. Similarly, Jesus states that no one can pull believers out of his hand (even themselves!).

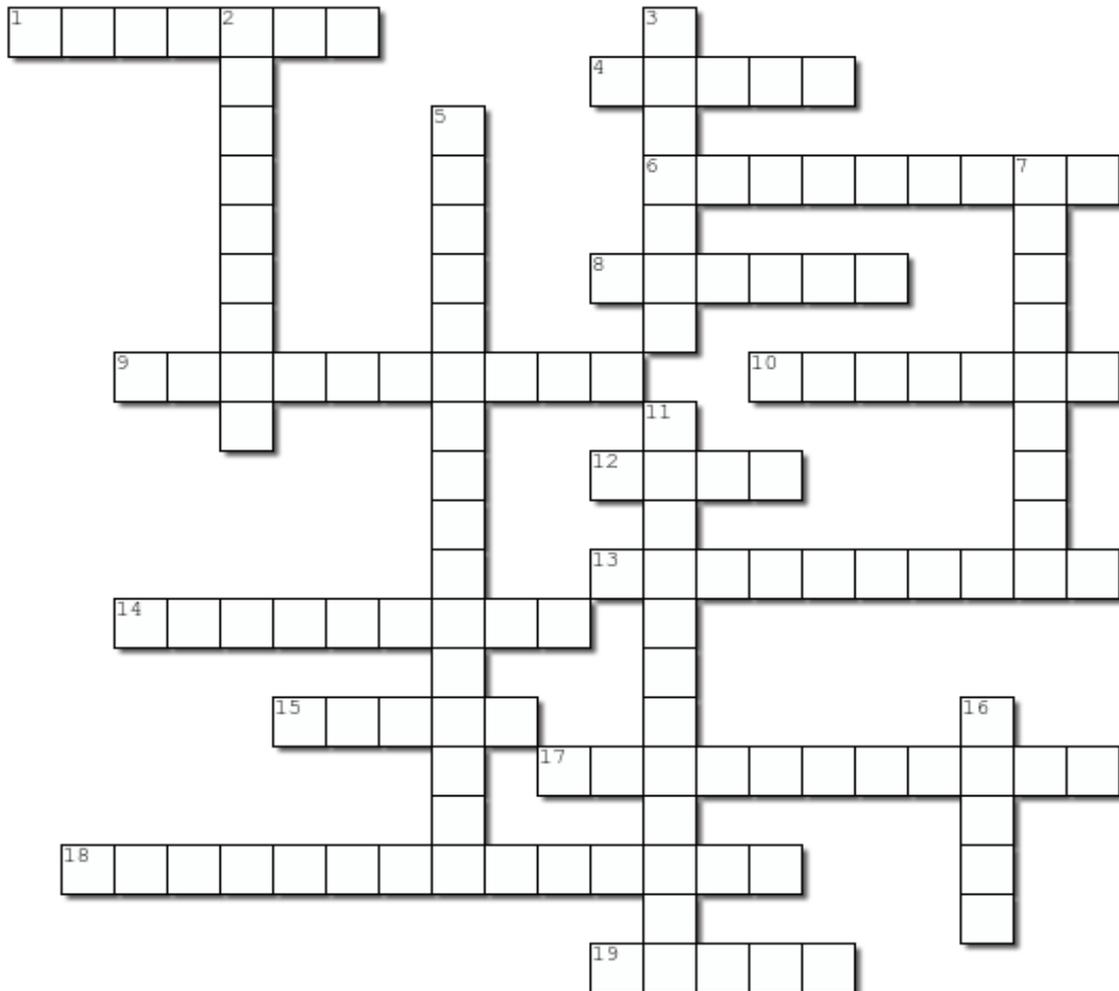
There is also a problem for the advocates of Libertarian Freedom in the structure of their argument. You see, to hold to this view, you must be completely sure that there is nothing that is effectively influencing you to make a decision. Can we ever be truly sure of that? Don't parents sometimes manipulate the decisions of their children to achieve a certain outcome? Do not magicians and hypnotists do much the same thing? How about subliminal advertising and messages...there is a reason that they are illegal in most contexts.

How about the marketing industry which is largely built on the idea of getting you to buy one brand of widget over their competitor's widget. We might accuse a magician of manipulating us, but we do not normally say that a marketing firm is manipulating us in a bad way. And so, if we are willing to grant such an influence to marketing companies, why not to God? And all that God does he does in a sinless way.

That is why "Free Agency" is a better term to use. Free Agency recognizes the possibility of influences — both those you are aware of and those you are not aware of — but still affirms that you are capable of making actions and decisions for which you can be held responsible.

We use the term "free will" pretty commonly in society to reflect the idea that we make decisions for which we are responsible. Yet, most commonly, people think of this free will as being libertarian in nature and that is unfortunate because it presumes things that are logically unprovable by experience and are inconsistent with the Scriptural testimony about our salvation. As Paul wrote regarding our election, "It depends not on human will or exertion but on God who has mercy." Free Agency is a better term and Compatibilistic Freedom is a better description of our actions — every action we take being consistent with the plan of God and the way God made our character.

Week 17 - Free Will



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Across

1. The Lord hardened this person's heart several times in the book of Exodus.
4. 'I will give them a _____ to know that I am Lord...'
6. This was on the people of Judah to allow them to obey the commands of God (3 words).
8. 'The plans of the heart belong to man but the answer of the _____ is from the Lord.'
9. The historical term used to speak of mankind as being responsible for their own actions.
10. The people could not believe because God had _____ their eyes.'
12. Joseph tells his brothers that though they meant their actions for evil, God meant it for _____.
13. A heretical view that says that God knows all the possible actions you could take, but not necessarily what you will do.
14. God's election does not depend on _____ or exertion, but on God who is merciful. (2 words)
15. 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me _____ him.'
17. What kind of Freedom is this: For every decision you make it is believed that you could have chosen otherwise.
18. A heretical view that says you should not evangelize because God brings people whom he will save.
19. 'The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his _____.'

Down

2. 'As many as were _____ to eternal life believed.'
3. The Lord hardened the heart of the King of _____ as recorded in Deuteronomy.
5. God works all things according to this (4 words).
7. God inclines _____ toward him (2 words).
11. This kind of freedom asserts that the choices you make are consistent both with your character and God's will.
16. Jesus says that God _____ his plans from the wise and understanding of men.