

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will

What Do You Mean by That?

(Part I. Wherein Are Explained Various Terms and Things Belonging to the Subject of the Ensuing Discourse)

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(Note: These notes are a lightly edited version of the notes that I used in teaching the class. The form is based on the style used by Winston Churchill for his speech notes. The HTML version doesn't show indentation but the PDF does. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version, copyright 1982, 1980, 1979 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.)

Let's begin today with prayer.

This is the third
of what will, Lord willing,
eventually be 11 meetings.

Let's briefly review what we talked about the last two weeks.

First,
what are we studying?

The book *Freedom of the Will*,
and the issues it raises.

Who wrote it?

Jonathan Edwards

When was Edwards born, and when did he die?

Born on October 5, 1703;
died on March 22, 1758.

When did Edwards write the book?

1754.

Where was he when he wrote it?

Stockbridge, Massachusetts,
as a missionary to the Indians.

Why is studying Edwards' book a good idea?

- (1) we should seek to understand
as much of God's truth as we can.
- (2) Edwards' book is one of the best
examinations of the subject of the will
that has ever been penned.
- (3) A proper understanding

of the subject of the will
is an antidote to some problems
that plague the church today,
including
arrogance,
faction,
and
worry.

Last week we looked at
Edwards' Preface.

What issue did he address in the preface?

Whether it is legitimate to use labels
such as Arminian or Calvinist
as shorthand for describing certain
beliefs.

What was Edwards' conclusion?

It is legitimate
so long as the labels
aren't used abusively.

We talked a bit about how labels
are sometimes used abusively today;
in particular we mentioned three ways.

(1) Using labels carelessly,
for example calling someone an Arminian
who does subscribe to all 5 major points
of Arminian theology of salvation.

(2) Using labels to demean others.

(3) Using labels to obscure the real issues.

Finally, in the first week (but not last week),
I also mentioned the class web site,
the address of which is on the handout each week.

The handouts,
my notes,
and MP3 audio for both previous classes
are available on the site.

I probably won't be able to keep the audio
for every class on the web,
because of size constraints,
but I will keep several weeks worth there,
so if you miss a week or two
while on vacation,
or for any other reason,

you might want to listen
to the classes you missed.

Are there any questions
about anything we talked about in the last two weeks,
or about the web site
before we move on?

This week we will discuss Part I,
Wherein Are Explained and Stated
Various Terms and Things
Belonging to the Subject
of the Ensuing Discourse.

How many of you read
all of Part I?

How many read at least one word of it?

In Part I,
Edwards mentions and discusses
each of the following terms and phrases,
among others:

the will,
determining the will,
motive,
good,
indifferent,
state of the mind,
the understanding,
necessary,
impossible,
contingent,
necessity
(of the philosophical,
natural,
and moral kinds),
inability
(of the natural and moral kinds),
freedom (or liberty),
moral agency,
indifference,
self-determining power,
and
circumstantial difference.

Each of these is listed on your handout,
but as I'm sure you realize,
we do not have time this morning
to talk in detail about every one,
or even a majority,
of these terms.

We could go through each one
very rapidly,
but I doubt that would be particularly helpful,
and I'm sure it would be quite boring.

What we'll do instead
is talk in detail about
only three of the terms.

Now if these 3 were not written on your handout,
I might ask you to guess which 3 we will discuss,
but since they are on your handout,
it wouldn't be much of a question.

So for the rest of today's class,
let's look at the meaning of
the will,
determining the will,
and freedom (or liberty).

In discussing these,
we'll touch on some of the other terms, too.

Edwards begins Parts I, Section I with these words,
which reveal a bit of Edwards'
rarely recognized,
but frequently present,
dry wit:

It may possibly be thought,
that there is no great need of going about
to define or describe the "will";
this word being generally as well understood
as any other words we can use to explain it.

And so perhaps it would be,
had not philosophers,
metaphysicians
and polemic divines
brought the matter into obscurity
by the things they have said of it.

But since it is so,
I think it may be of some use,
and will tend to the greater clearness
in the following discourse,
to say a few things concerning it.

As an aside,
if you have some free time this week,
think a bit about other terms or concepts
that philosophers or theologians
have brought into obscurity.

Edwards continues:

... I observe,
that the will (without any metaphysical refining) is,
that by which the mind chooses anything.
The faculty of the will is that power,
or principle of mind,
by which it is capable of choosing.
An act of the will
is the same
as an act of choosing or choice.

(skipping a bit)

... by whatever names we call the act of the will:
choosing, refusing,
approving, disapproving,
liking, disliking,
embracing, rejecting,
determining, directing,
commanding, forbidding,
inclining or being averse,
a being pleased or displeased with;
all may be reduced to this of choosing

To put this into as few words as possible,
according to Edwards,
**the will may be defined simply as
the mind choosing.**

Or, if you prefer,
you're welcome to substitute
either "soul"
or "heart"
for "mind".

Edwards, just like the Bible,
often uses those three terms
interchangeably.

(If you have doubts about whether
the Bible really uses these terms interchangeably,
you might want to see the notes from
a previous Sunday School class I taught
<http://www.logicteacher.com/bws/bws-class02-notes.htm>)

One thing that I particularly like
about this definition
is that it makes clear that
the will is
not some separate part —
that is
the will is not
a part of the mind
like, for example,
kidneys are part of the body —

rather the will
is simply a name for
a particular function
that the mind performs.

Any questions about this so far?

In the text, Edwards has several pages
in which he addresses
some of what John Locke wrote
about a difference between
preference and choice
in
[*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.*](#)

Locke claims
that someone may desire one thing,
but choose another,
and that thus
the will and the affections
may run counter to each other.

Edwards, in contrast,
writes:
A man never, in any instance,
wills anything contrary to his desires,
or desires anything contrary to his will.

Who is right:
Locke or Edwards?

<< discussion >>

At first glance,
it seems that Locke must be right,
because Edwards seems to contradict
Paul in Romans 7, where he writes (NASB):

{15} ... for I am not practicing
what I would like to do,
but I am doing the very thing I hate. ...

{19} For the good that I wish,
I do not do;
but I practice the very evil
that I do not wish.

Edwards says that
a man never chooses
anything contrary to his desires,
but
Paul says that
he chooses to do evil
contrary to his desire to do good.

Surely there's a contradiction here,
isn't there?

There surely would be a contradiction
if Jonathan Edwards and Paul
were talking about exactly the same thing,
but they aren't.

What's the difference
between what they're talking about?
(If you've not read Edwards,
you might not be able to tell;
if you have read him,
you should recognize the difference.)

The primary difference is that
Paul is talking about *abstract* desires
and *specific* actions (or choices),
whereas
Edwards is talking about *specific* desires
and *specific* choices.

In the abstract,
when he's not confronted with a specific choice,
Paul does not want to sin,
rather he wants to please God
(just as, I trust, we all do).

But when in a specific situation,
when confronted with a specific choice —
sin or obey God —
Paul (just like us)
sometimes chose to sin;
and at those moments,
in those specific situations,
Paul (just like us)
wanted to sin
more than he wanted to obey God.

He chose to do that which,
at that moment,
he most wanted to do,
just as Edwards writes.

Our abstract desires
and our specific choices
may not always agree with each other;
but
our specific desires
and our specific choices
will always agree.

Does anyone not understand
this distinction?

I suppose one way to describe
the differences between
a mature Christian
and an immature Christian
is to say that
a mature Christian
has fewer conflicts
between his abstract desires
and his specific desires.

That is,
he wants to please God,
not only when he's sitting comfortably
in the pew on the Lord's Day,
but also
when his boss is yelling at him
in the office on Monday.

That's the will.

Let's talk now a bit
about "determining the will";
what does this phrase mean?

Will someone explain?
You may look at your outline
and try to fill in the blanks, if you wish.

According to Edwards,
**the will is determined by the
motive
that is
strongest
to the mind.**

Some people might object to this statement,
by claiming that talking of a single motive
is too restrictive,
because people often have multiple motives.

Edwards anticipates such an objection,
and clarifies what he means by motive like this:

By motive,
I mean the whole of that which moves,
excites,
or invites
the mind to volition,
whether that be one thing singly,
or many things conjunctly.
Many particular things may concur
and unite their strength
to induce the mind;
and when it is so,

all together are
as it were
one complex motive.
And when I speak of
the strongest motive,
I have respect to the strength of the whole
that operates to induce
to a particular act of volition,
whether that be the strength of one thing alone,
or of many together.

Does this make sense to you?

Edwards continues his discussion
of the subject by explaining
what he means by
the *strongest* motive,
and writing at some length
about what constitutes *good*,
and how what is considered good by one person
might not be considered good by another.

Based on his particular definition of good,
he offers as another way of stating
what determines the will,
the following:
the will always is
as the greatest apparent good is.

Within the context of Edwards' careful definitions,
this statement is equivalent to
the earlier statement about
the strongest motive determining the will.

However,
because it is quite easy for someone
to think of "apparent good" in a sense
different from what is meant by Edwards,
I don't much like his restatement.

Too many people may,
I think,
believe that it suggests that
people always want to do good,
and never evil.

Edwards doesn't say that, of course,
but some may think he does;
so I prefer to talk about
the will being determined
by the strongest motive,
and not by the greatest apparent good
(although I'll repeat
these two are really the same thing,

within the context of Edwards' definitions).

That's all I'll say this morning
about determining the will,
unless there are some questions
or comments.

Finally,
let's discuss "freedom"
(or, if you prefer, "liberty").

Edwards begins Section 5 of Part I this way:

The plain and obvious meaning
of the words "freedom" and "liberty",
in common speech, is
the power,
opportunity,
or advantage,
that anyone has,
to do as he pleases.
Or in other words,
his being free from hindrance or impediment
in the way of doing,
or conducting in any respect,
as he wills.

And the contrary to liberty,
whatever name we call that by,
is a person's being hindered or unable
to conduct as he will,
or being necessitated to do otherwise.

To put this a tad more succinctly,
Edwards is saying that
freedom is
opportunity to do what you will,

He goes a little later on to note what may prevent freedom:

There are two things contrary to
what is called liberty in common speech.

One is *constraint*;
otherwise called force,
compulsion,
and co-action;
which is a person's
being necessitated to do a thing
contrary to his will.

The other is *restraint*;
which is his being hindered,
and not having power
to do according to his will.

In other words,

you are not free
if you are *required*
to do something
you do not want to do;
neither are you free
if you are *prevented*
from doing something
that you want to do.

<< Discuss example of person walking down street and being confronted by man with gun, who demands, "Your money or your life." >>

... one thing more I would observe
concerning what is vulgarly called liberty.

Namely,
that power and opportunity,
for one to do and conduct as he will,
or according to his choice,
is all that is meant by it.

Without taking into the meaning of the word,
anything of the cause of that choice,
or at all considering how the person
came to have such a volition,
whether it was caused by some external motive,
or internal habitual bias.

Whether it was determined
by some internal antecedent volition,
or whether it happened without a cause;
whether it was necessarily connected
with something foregoing, or not connected.

Let the person come by his choice anyhow,
yet,
if he is able,
and there is nothing in the way
to hinder his pursuing and executing his will,
the man is perfectly free,
according to,
the primary and common notion of freedom.

I suspect that Edwards was correct in 1754
in writing thus about
the common notion of freedom.

Does this still describe
the common notion of freedom today?

I don't really think that it does.

Rather I think that
other notions of freedom have taken hold,
and now predominate.

In the next two classes,
we'll look in more detail

at some of these other notions
about what constitutes freedom.

Next week we will consider,
among other things,
the question:
“Can the Will Be Self-Determining?”

We'll be looking at the first 7 sections
of Part II,
Wherein It Is Considered,
whether There Is,
or Can Be
Any Such Sort of Freedom of Will,
as That wherein Arminians
Place the Essence of the Liberty
of All Moral Agents;
and Whether Any Such Thing Ever Was,
or Can Be Conceived of.

If you have access to the book,
please read sections 1-7 of Part II.

Also,
please read again
Romans 8-11;
as I mentioned last week,
reading that extended passage will be
part of your assignment each week.

I'll end this morning
by reading a fairly lengthy paragraph
from Part I,
which once again illustrates Edwards' wit,
and which will also, I hope,
stimulate your thinking a bit.

This comes from Section 5,
just after Edwards gives the definition
of freedom/liberty.

If this,
which I have mentioned,
be the meaning of the word liberty,
in the ordinary use of language,
as I trust that none that has ever learned to talk,
and is unprejudiced
will deny;
then it will follow
that in propriety of speech,
neither liberty,
nor its contrary,
can properly be ascribed
to any being or thing,
but that which has such a faculty,

power,
or property,
as is called will.

For that which is possessed of
no will,
cannot have any power or opportunity
of doing according to
its will,
nor be necessitated
to act contrary to
its will,
nor be restrained
from acting agreeably
to it.

And therefore to talk of liberty,
or the contrary,
as belonging to
the very will itself,
is not to speak good sense;
if we judge of sense,
and nonsense,
by the original and proper
signification of words. —

For the will itself
is not an agent
that has a will:
the power of choosing,
itself,
has not a power of choosing.

That which has the power of volition
is the man, or the soul,
and not the power of volition itself.

And he that has the liberty
of doing according to his will
is the agent
who is possessed of the will;
and not the will,
which he is possessed of.

We say with propriety,
that a bird let loose
has power and liberty to fly;
but not that the bird's power of flying
has a power and liberty of flying.

To be free is the property of an agent,
who is possessed of powers and faculties,
as much as to be cunning,
valiant,
bountiful,
or zealous.

But these qualities

are the properties of persons,
and not the properties of properties.