

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will

God is Necessarily Good —

Does This Mean He Cannot be Good?

*Part III. Wherein Is Inquired, whether Any Such Liberty of Will as Arminians Hold,
Be Necessary to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Praise and Dispraise, etc. — Sections 1-3*

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by C. Michael Holloway

*(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
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Let's begin with prayer.

This is our sixth meeting,
although after skipping two weeks,
it almost seems like we're starting over.

Before we review the past five classes,
can someone tell me what happened
on this date
34 years ago?

The first lunar landing.

How many of you knew that?

What's that have to do with today's class?

Nothing at all,
unless, I suppose, we ask:
What would Jonathan Edwards
think about the lunar landing?

I don't really know what he would think,
although I will say with a high degree of confidence,
that I know one thing he would not think,
namely,
that the whole thing was faked,
unlike some 10% of the US population today,
which does believe it was faked.

10% —
that's certainly larger than
the percentage of reformed believers in the U.S.

Now let's get back to our subject
and review quickly the past 5 classes.

Recall, that we're studying a book by Jonathan Edwards,
which is usually called *Freedom of the Will*,
although its full title is some 30 words longer.

Edwards published this book
in 1754 when he was a missionary to Indians
in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

Recall also that we learned that Edwards
defined the will as
the mind choosing;
said that
the will is determined by
the motive
that is
strongest
to the mind;
and defined freedom as
the opportunity to do what you will.

In week four
we saw that some people believe
that this definition for freedom
is incomplete,
because it leaves out 3 components,
namely
self-determination,
indifference,
and contingency.

We've looked at Edwards' arguments
against each of these,
covering the arguments against
self-determination and indifference
in week four,
and the arguments against
contingency
in week five.

With that,
we finished Part II of the book,
and took our two week hiatus.

Are there any questions
about anything we talked
about in the first five meetings?

Today,
we'll look at the first 3 sections of Part III.

Before we do that, however,
I want to quickly mention,
just in case we run out of time at the end,
what your homework assignment
for this week will be.

There are 3 items this time.

The first two are the standard things:
if you have access to the book,
please read Sections 4-7 of Part III;
and
and as always,
please also read
Romans 8-11 multiple times.

The third item is new this week,
and it is to ask 5 people
to give you a definition for
“free will”.

There are only two restrictions.

First, you can't ask anyone from CRPC —
well, that's not really true,
you can ask CRPC members if you want —
but I'm not interested in hearing the answers.

Second,
when you ask someone to give you a definition,
please don't give them any hints
about what you think the definition is.

You don't need to try to do all 5 this week,
but try to get to 5 before the class is over.

If you have access to e-mail,
please e-mail the answers you get to
<freewill at logicteacher dot com>;
otherwise,
please write them down
and give them to me on paper.

Assuming enough of you
complete the assignment,
we'll talk about a couple of definitions each week
for the next few weeks,
and, at the end,
we'll see if a couple of hypotheses
that I have survive this exercise.

Any questions about this assignment?

Part III of *Freedom of the Will* is titled,
WHEREIN IS INQUIRED,
WHETHER ANY SUCH
LIBERTY OF WILL AS ARMINIANS HOLD,
BE NECESSARY
TO MORAL AGENCY,
VIRTUE, AND VICE,
PRAISE AND DISPRAISE, ETC

It begins with these words:

Having considered the first thing proposed,
relating to that freedom of will which Arminians maintain;
namely,
Whether any such thing does,
ever did,
or ever can exist,
I come now to the second thing proposed
to be the subject of inquiry,
[namely]
Whether any such kind of liberty
be requisite to moral agency,
virtue and vice,
praise and blame,
reward and punishment, etc.

In part II,
Edwards tried to show
that the Arminian notion of “free will”
did not,
and could not,
be true.

In this part,
he will try to show
that the Arminian notion of “free will”
is not necessary
to give meaning
to concepts such as
praise and blame.

Someone might think,
“if you’ve shown that
there’s *no such thing* as free will
in the Arminian sense,
why do you then consider
whether it’s necessary?”

Isn’t that kind of like
setting out to show
that tigers don’t need to eat unicorns in order to live
after you’ve already shown
that there’s no such thing as unicorns?

How would you answer that?
Why is it important to consider
the issue Edwards considers
In Part III?

Theoretically at least
it’s possible that the meaningfulness
of praise and blame
depends on the Arminian notion of free will,

which itself doesn't exist.

That would mean, of course,
that praise and blame would have no meaning either.

Since Edwards believes
that the Bible teaches both
that praise and blame have meaning,
and
that the Arminian notion of free will is false,
it is quite important to show
that praise and blame
are still possible
without Arminian "free will."

Arminian theologians and lay people
both in Edwards day,
and in ours,
assert quite strongly that this isn't the case.

Whitby, for example,
is quoted by Edwards as writing:
"for who can blame a person
for doing only what he could not help,
or judge that he deserves praise
only for what he could not avoid?"

Or in other words,
if the will isn't free from necessity,
then a person should
neither be blamed for doing evil,
nor praised for doing good.

Or in still other words,
unless I am able to do good,
I should not be blamed for doing evil,
and unless I am able to do evil,
I should not be praised for doing good.

Perhaps that sounds fairly reasonable
on first thought,
and perhaps on second
and third thought, too.

It certainly sounds reasonable to a lot of people,
because this view dominates our society today,
both inside the Christian community,
and outside it, too.

But just because a certain view
is held by a majority —
even a super majority —
doesn't mean that it is right.

In Part III, Edwards gives
several arguments to show
that it *cannot* be the right view.

Today, we'll talk about three of those arguments
from sections 1 to 3.

The first two arguments
show the falsity of claiming
that unless someone is capable of evil,
he is not worthy of praise for doing good;
and the third one
shows the falsity of claiming
that unless someone is capable of good,
he is not worthy of blame.

Let's look at these now.

The first argument is fairly simple:
Ability to do evil cannot be necessary for praise,
because if it were,
God,
who can do no evil,
would not be worthy of praise.

Listen to how Edwards makes the argument.

Arminians,
so far as I have had opportunity to observe,
generally acknowledge
that God is necessarily holy,
and his will necessarily determined
to that which is good.

So that,
putting these things together,
the infinitely holy God —
who always used to be
esteemed by God's people
not only virtuous,
but a Being in whom is
all possible virtue,
and every virtue
in the most absolute purity and perfection,
and in infinitely greater
brightness and amiableness
than in any creature;
the most perfect pattern of virtue,
and the fountain from whom
all others' virtue is but as beams from the sun;
and who has been supposed to be,
on the account of his virtue and holiness,
infinitely more worthy to be esteemed,
loved,
honored,

admired,
commended,
extolled,
and praised,
than any creature;
and he who is thus everywhere
represented in Scripture:
I say, this Being,
according to this notion of Dr. Whitby,
and other Arminians,
has no virtue at all;
virtue,
when ascribed to him,
is but “an empty name”;
and he is deserving
of no commendation or praise;
because he is under necessity,
he cannot avoid
being holy and good as he is;
therefore no thanks to him for it.

He then goes on to write:

There needs no other confutation of this notion,
to Christians acquainted with the Bible,
but only stating and particularly representing it.
To bring texts of Scripture,
wherein God is represented,
as in every respect,
in the highest manner virtuous,
and supremely praiseworthy,
would be endless,
and is altogether needless
to such as have been brought up
in the light of the gospel.

What has Edwards said here?

If you believe what the Bible says about God,
then you *cannot believe* that
a being must be capable of evil
in order to be praised for doing good.

God is necessarily good —
His will is not free in the Arminian sense,
because He is incapable of evil —
but He is also worthy of our highest praise;
so the Arminian notion of “free will”
cannot be,
according to the Bible,
necessary to praiseworthiness.

Are there any questions about this argument?

In section 2 Edwards gives his second argument

against the necessity
of the Arminian notion of “free will”;
I’ve summarized this on your handout as:
Jesus was not free to sin,
yet He is worthy of praise.

This is basically the same argument
as the first one,
with the second person of the Trinity
substituted for the whole Godhead.

But,
there is a significant difference.

Does someone want to explain that difference?

No one who claims to be a Bible-believing Christian —
its strange that in our day the phrases
“Bible-believing Christian”
and “Christian”
are not synonymous —

No one who claims to be a Bible-believing Christian
will claim that God is capable of sin,
but many will claim that Jesus
was capable of sin while on earth.

That is,
you can say, “God cannot sin”
in almost any Christian gathering,
and no one will look at you strangely;
but in this same gathering,
saying, “Jesus could not have sinned,”
will probably get you some funny looks,
if not an immediate verbal reprimand.

I think the prevailing modern view
is expressed in the song
“The Devil Went Down to Jordan”
(a Christian parody of the Charlie Daniels’ song
“The Devil Went Down to Georgia”)
by the group Apologetix;

the lyrics include these words:
“...Jesus left the Jordan
and the devil hit Him hard
And if he wins
we get to walk on Heaven’s streets of gold
But if He sins,
the devil gets your soul.”

The clear implication here is
that it was possible that Jesus could have sinned.

Let’s look now at what
Jonathan Edwards has to say about it.

... first, I would show,
(Edwards writes)
that [Christ's] holy behavior was necessary;
or that it was impossible
it should be otherwise,
than that he should behave himself holily,
and that he should be perfectly holy
in each individual act of his life.
And secondly,
that his holy behavior
was properly of the nature of virtue,
and was worthy of praise;
and some things
we won't time to talk about today.

He begins his discussion
of the first of these matters
with these words:

It was impossible,
that the acts of the will
of Christ's human soul should,
in any instance,
degree,
or circumstance,
be otherwise than holy,
and agreeable to
God's nature and will.

The following things make this evident.

Edwards then gives 11 arguments
to "make it evident".

I'll read excerpts from
three of those arguments
and then we'll talk a bit.

Edwards first argument begins like this:

God had promised
so effectually to preserve
and uphold him by his Spirit,
under all his temptations,
that he could not fail of the end
for which he came into the world;
but he would have failed,
had he fallen into sin.

We have such a promise [in] Isa. 42:1-4.

"Behold my Servant,
whom I uphold;
mine Elect,
in whom my soul delighteth:
I have put my Spirit upon him:
he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles:

he shall not cry,
nor lift up,
nor cause his voice
to be heard in the street. —
He shall bring forth judgment unto truth.
He shall not fail,
nor be discouraged,
till he have set judgment in the earth;
and the isles shall wait his law.”

After expanding on this for a bit,
Edwards begins his second argument like this:

The same thing is evident
from all the promises
which God made to the Messiah,
of his future glory,
kingdom,
and success, in his office
and character of a Mediator:
which glory could not have been obtained,
if his holiness had failed,
and he had been guilty of sin.
God’s absolute promise
makes the things promised necessary,
and their failing to take place
absolutely impossible:
and, in like manner,
it makes those things necessary,
on which the thing promised depends,
and without which it cannot take effect.

Quite a bit further along in the chapter,
Edwards gives his 10th argument:

If it was possible
for Christ to have failed
of doing the will of his Father,
and so to have failed
of effectually working out
redemption for sinners;
then the salvation of all the saints,
who were saved from the beginning of the world
to the death of Christ,
was not built on a firm foundation.

The Messiah,
and the redemption,
which he was to work out
by his obedience unto death,
was the saving foundation
of all that ever were saved.

Therefore, if when the Old Testament saints
had the pardon of their sins
and the favor of God promised them,

and salvation bestowed upon them,
still it was possible that the Messiah,
when he came, might commit sin,
then all this was on a foundation
that was not firm and stable,
but liable to fail;
something which it was possible
might never be.

Do these things make sense?

Do you see how the truth of these statements
ensures that Christ could not have sinned?

Each of these arguments could, perhaps,
be collapsed into the following single sentence:
Jesus could not have sinned,
because long before the Incarnation,
God promised that the Messiah
would live a perfectly holy life,
and this promise could not be made
if it were possible for Him to sin.

After establishing that Christ could not have sinned,
Edwards moves on to establish
that Christ is nevertheless worthy of praise.

He drives this point home
in several paragraphs
too lengthy to fully quote here;
I'll just read a little bit:

if there was no merit
in Christ's obedience unto death,
if it was not worthy of praise,
and of the most glorious rewards,
the heavenly hosts were exceedingly mistaken,
by the account that is given of them
(Rev. 5:8-12), [quote from NKJV, not Edwards]

Now when He had taken the scroll,
the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders
fell down before the Lamb,
each having a harp,
and golden bowls full of incense,
which are the prayers of the saints.

And they sang a new song,
saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals;

For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
And have made us kings and priests to our God;
And we shall reign on the earth."
Then I looked,

and I heard the voice of many angels
around the throne,
the living creatures,
and the elders;
and the number of them was ten thousand
times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands,
saying with a loud voice:
"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
To receive power
and riches and wisdom,
And strength
and honor
and glory
and blessing!"

Any questions about this?

So, to summarize section 2:

Jesus could not have sinned,
yet He is worthy of praise nonetheless;
therefore,
"free will" in the Arminian sense,
Is not required to justify praise.

Our last subject for this morning
is Edwards' argument in section 3
which is summarized on your handout like this:
No one can avoid sin,
but everyone is declared
blameworthy for that sin.

Edwards' discussion is divided
into two parts:
first he talks about those
who are declared to be given over to sin;
then he talks about
people in general.

He establishes that there is such a thing
as God giving someone up to sin like this:

That there is such a thing
as men being judicially given up to sin,
is certain, if the Scripture rightly informs us;
such a thing being often there spoken of:
as in Psa. 81:12
"So I gave them up to their own
hearts' lust,
and they walked
in their own counsels."
(Acts 7:42) "Then God turned,
and gave them up to worship the host of heaven."
(Rom. 1:24) "Wherefore, God also gave them up

to uncleanness, through the lusts of their own hearts,
to dishonor their own bodies between themselves.”
(Rom. 1:26) “For this cause God gave them up
to vile affections.”
(Rom. 1:28) “And even as they did not like to retain God
in their knowledge,
God gave them over to a reprobate mind,
to do those things that are not convenient.”

Edwards then gives two specific examples from Scripture,
and asserts that if the Arminian notion of “free will” be true,
then no blame attaches in either example:

If not only coercion,
but all necessity,
will prove men blameless,
then Judas was blameless,
after Christ had given him over,
and had already declared
his certain damnation,
and that he should verily betray him.

He was guilty of no sin in betraying his Master,
on this supposition;
though his so doing is spoken of by Christ
as the most aggravated sin,
more heinous than the sin of Pilate
in crucifying him.

And the Jews in Egypt,
in Jeremiah’s time,
were guilty of no sin,
in their not worshiping the true God,
after God had “sworn by his great name,
that his name should be no more named
in the mouth of any man of Judah,
in all the land of Egypt,” (Jer. 44:26).

If one must be able to not do evil
in order to be subject to blame,
then Judas could not be blamed,
because by the declaration of Jesus,
his betrayal of Jesus was certain —
he could not do otherwise.

Any questions about this?

Edwards also writes about the necessity of sin
in men not explicitly given over by God to sin,
but rather simply affected by original sin.

It’s a bit difficult
to do full justice to Edwards argument here,
without quoting it completely,
but we’ll try to get by
with following excerpt.

They say, (Arminians, that is)
it would not be just in God
to require of us *perfect obedience*,
because it would not be just
to require more than we can perform,
or to punish us for failing of it.

And, therefore,
by their own scheme,
the imperfections of our obedience
do not deserve to be punished.
What need therefore of Christ dying, to satisfy for them?
What need of his suffering,
to satisfy for that which is no fault,
and in its own nature deserves no suffering?
What need of Christ dying,
to purchase that our imperfect obedience
should be accepted,
when,
according to their scheme,
it would be unjust in itself,
that any other obedience than imperfect
should be required?

What need of Christ dying
to make way for God's accepting
of such obedience,
as it would be unjust in him not to accept?

Is there any need of Christ dying
to prevail with God not to do unrighteously? —
If it be said,
that Christ died to satisfy that old law for us,
that so we might not be under it,
but that there might be room
for our being under a more mild law;
still I would inquire,
what need of Christ dying,
that we might not be under a law,
which (by their principles)
it would be in itself unjust that we should be under,
whether Christ had died or no,
because,
in our present state,
we are not able to keep it?

Can someone explain briefly
what this means?

For every person, sin is inevitable.

If it is unjust to punish someone
for that which is inevitable,
then it is unjust to punish someone for sin.

If it is unjust to punish for sin,
then Christ did not need to die

to satisfy God's justice.

Thus,
if the Arminian notion of free will
is necessary to give meaning to praise and blame,
then Christ did not need to die.

Of course, we know that Christ did need to die;
therefore,
free will cannot be necessary
to give meaning to praise and blame.

So says Jonathan Edwards.

Are there any questions or comments?

Don't forget your homework,
especially the soliciting of definitions
of "free will."

I expect to have an e-mail box full
of definitions before the week is out.