

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will
Of Commands, Motives, and Ability

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 4-7

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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.
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Let's begin with prayer.

This is our seventh meeting ---
we have only 4 more to go after this one.
Let's begin with a quick review,
as is my custom.

We're studying a book by Jonathan Edwards,
which is usually called *Freedom of the Will*,
although its full title is quite a bit longer.
Edwards published this book
in 1754 when he was a missionary to Indians
in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

We've learned that in the book 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.

We have also seen 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.

Last week we looked at the first 3 sections of Part III

What's the main issue JE is addressing in Part III?

Whether “free will” (in the Arminian sense)
is necessary to give meaning
to concepts such as praise and blame,
reward and punishment.

What 3 arguments against this
did we discuss last week?

God is unable to sin,
but He is worthy of praise.

Jesus was unable to sin,
but He is worthy of praise.

Fallen man is unable to not sin,
but we are blameworthy for our sin.

In addition to material from Edwards’ book,
in week 5 we also talked about
what I referred to as
“the ubiquity of stupidity”.

Does anyone remember what that was about?

The fact that we all have blind spots,
and just because
we might be able to see the blind spots of the Arminians
when it comes to their concept of free will,
gives us no reason
for pride,
because each of us has
areas in which we sincerely believe
something that is false.

That’s our review;
are there any questions?

Let’s talk briefly now
about one of your homework assignments,
which was to ask people to define “free will” for you.

No one sent me any definitions,
so it is a good thing that I did the assignment myself.

Here are 3 definitions given to me:

“Free will is the process of volition
that allows multiple courses of actions
to be considered and evaluated
and one selected.”

“Free will is the ability to choose
according to rational thought.”

“Free will is the ability to make my own choices,
as opposed to an external force
making decisions for me.”

Our main focus for today
is the latter half of Part III of the book,
which consists of sections 4-7.

These sections have the following titles:

- 4: Command and obligation to obedience
consistent with moral inability to obey
- 5: That sincerity of desires and endeavors,
which is supposed to excuse
in the nonperformance of things
in themselves good,
particularly considered
- 6: Liberty of indifference,
not only not necessary to virtue,
but utterly inconsistent with it;
and all, either virtuous or vicious habits
or inclinations,
inconsistent with Arminian notions
of liberty and moral agency
- 7: Arminian notions of moral agency
inconsistent with all influence
of motive and inducement,
in either virtuous or vicious actions

We will have time this morning
to look only at sections 4 and 5;
I'll leave sections 6 and 7 as exercises
for the diligent.

Section 4 begins this way:

It being so much insisted on
by Arminian writers,
that necessity is inconsistent with
law or command,
and particularly,
that it is absurd to suppose God by his command
should require that of men which they are unable to do;
not allowing in this case
for any difference between
natural and moral inability;
I would therefore now particularly consider this matter.
And for greater clearness
I would distinctly lay down the following things.

These “following things”

turn out to be 3 main propositions,
with quite a few sub-propositions
and corollaries.
We'll concentrate on the 3 main propositions.

The first of these is this:

The will itself,
and not only those actions
which are the effects of the will,
is the proper object of precept or command.

What's this mean?

Edwards is being a tad loose in his wording here,
because,
as he made clear earlier in the book,
the will doesn't exist in any real sense,
and as such,
talking about "the will itself"
doesn't make sense.

But as we talked about a few classes ago,
Edwards said that he would be use the phrases loosely,
to be consistent with common usage.

What he's saying is that
commands are properly and always
directed at the soul,
telling the soul what choices it should make,
or in fewer, less precise, words,
commands are directed at the will.

For example,
if I give the command to David,
"Stand up on your feet,"
what my command really requires
is that David make the choices in his mind
necessary to cause his body to
perform the actions to stand —
I'm not giving a command
directly to his legs or feet.

As Edwards writes:
This is most manifest;
for, it is the soul only,
that is properly and directly
the subject of precepts or commands,
that only
being capable of receiving
or perceiving commands.

And a little later in the section,

Obedience,
in the primary nature of it,
is the submitting and yielding of the will of one,
to the will of another.
Disobedience is the not consenting,
not complying of the will of the commanded,
to the manifested will of the commander.
Other acts that are not the acts of the will,
as certain motions of the body and alterations in the soul,
are obedience or disobedience only indirectly,
as they are connected with the state or actions
of the will,
according to an established law of nature.

So that's the first main proposition in this section:
commands are directed at the soul (or mind) choosing,
that is, the will.

The second proposition is a bit more complicated:

... the very opposition or defect of the will itself,
in that act which is its
original and determining act in the case,
I say the will's opposition *in this act*
to a thing proposed or commanded,
or its failing of compliance,
implies a moral inability to that thing:

or in other words,
whenever a command requires
a certain state or act of the will,
and the person commanded,
notwithstanding the command
and the circumstances under which
it is exhibited,
still finds his will opposite or wanting,
in *that*, ...
that man is morally unable
to obey that command.

To understand what I've just quoted,
we have to understand the distinction
Edwards makes
between
moral inability and
natural inability.

He wrote about these back in Section I,
but we skipped it then —
primarily because we wouldn't
need to talk about the difference until this class.

Moral inability refers
to the inability to make a certain choice,
because some stronger motive

inclines you to make another choice.

Or, to be as simple as possible,
moral inability is simply unwillingness —
you are morally unable
to do what you refuse to will.

Natural inability refers
to the inability to do
what you *would* do
if you could do it —
this is truly inability.

Here's a simple example.

I am morally unable
to root for a University of North Carolina athletic team —
I simply do not want to do such a horrid thing.

I am naturally unable
to set the world record
for the fastest time in the 100m run —
I wanted to do it since I was about 12 years old,
but I cannot do it,
no matter how much I might want to.

Two quick asides:

First,
many people misunderstand
Calvinists as teaching that
the non-elect have
natural inability to believe on Christ
(they want to but can't);
whereas the true teaching
is that the non-elect have
moral inability to believe on Christ
(that is, they are unwilling to do so).

Second,
perhaps one of the ways that parents
most often disobey the commandment
to not provoke our children to anger
is by not recognizing the difference
between moral inability
(for which they deserve discipline)
and natural inability
(for which they do not deserve discipline).

So, back to Edwards' second proposition
in section 4 —

What does he mean?

Perhaps another quote

will help make his meaning clear.

... a man may ... be said
to be morally unable to do a thing,
when he is under the influence or prevalence
of a contrary inclination,
or has a want of inclination....

It is also evident,
from what has been before proved,
that the will is always,
and in every individual act,
necessarily determined by the strongest motive;
and so is always unable
to go against the motive,
which,
all things considered,
has now the greatest strength and advantage
to move the will.

Does that help?

What's a short sentence that
summarizes the second proposition?

**Every act of disobedience
is an instance of moral inability.**

That's the second main proposition of section 4.

The third proposition
is perhaps even more difficult
to express simply than the 2nd one was.

Here's how Edwards' begins the discussion:

Though the opposition of the will itself,
or the very want of will to a thing commanded,
implies a moral inability to that thing;
yet, if it be, as has been already shown,
that the being of a good state or act of will,
is a thing most properly required
by command;
then, in some cases,
such a state or act of will may properly be required,
which at present is not,
and which may also be wanting
after it is commanded.
Therefore, those things may properly be commanded,
for which men have a moral inability.

Such a state or act of the will
may be required by command,
as does not already exist.
For, if that volition only may be commanded to be,
which already is,

there could be no use of precept:
commands in all cases
would be perfectly vain and impertinent.
And not only may such a will be required,
as is wanting before the command is given,
but also such as may
possibly be wanting afterwards;
such as the exhibition of the command
may not be effectual to produce or excite.
Otherwise,
no such thing as disobedience
to a proper and rightful command is possible in any case;
and there is no case supposable or possible,
wherein there can be
an inexcusable or faulty disobedience.

If merely that inability will excuse disobedience,
which is implied in the opposition
or defect of inclination,
remaining after the command is exhibited,
then wickedness always carries
that in it which excuses it.

What's this mean?

One of the things it means,
and what I'll say
is the third main proposition of the section is this:
**Disobedience to a command
is impossible
if moral inability excuses it.**

If these three propositions are true,
along with other things that we've discussed preciously,
then,
in Edwards words,
it is manifest,
that moral inability alone
(which consists in disinclination)
never renders anything
improperly the subject matter
of precept or command,
and never can excuse any person
in disobedience,
or want of conformity
to a command.

Or, in my words,
unwillingness to obey a legitimate command
neither invalidates the command,
nor excuses disobedience of it.

Now this probably seems obvious.

Surely there aren't many Christian parents around
who believe that a child saying,
"But I don't want to,"
invalidates a command they give the child,
and entitles the child to disobey the command.

And that's true
even if the parent knows before giving the command
that the child is not going to want to obey it.

Yet,
although the truth of what Edwards has written
is obvious at some level,
at another level
it is far from obvious to many Christians.

One of the central tenets
of the Arminian view of salvation
is that it would be completely wrong of God
to command people to trust in Christ
when He fully knows
that they will not want to do it.

Edwards has shown in section 4
that this view is incorrect,
because unwillingness
(that is, moral inability)
cannot be an excuse,
without abandoning entirely
the whole concept of disobedience.

That's section 4;
are there any questions?

In the fairly short amount of time left this morning,
let's talk now about section 5.

Here's how Edwards begins the section:

It is much insisted on by many, that some men,
though they are not able to perform spiritual duties,
such as repentance of sin,
love to God,
a cordial acceptance of Christ
as exhibited and offered in the gospel,
etc.
yet they may sincerely desire
and endeavor after these things;
and therefore must be excused;
it being unreasonable to blame 'em
for the omission of those things,
which they sincerely desire and endeavor
to do,
but cannot.
Concerning this matter,

the following things may be observed.

He then makes four main observations.

The first observation begins like this

1. What is here supposed,
is a great mistake,
and gross absurdity;
even that men
may sincerely choose and desire
those spiritual duties of love,
acceptance,
choice,
rejection,
etc.
consisting in the exercise of the will itself,
or in the disposition and inclination
of the [soul];
and yet not be able
to perform or exert them.
This is absurd,
because 'tis absurd to suppose
that a man should
directly,
properly,
and sincerely incline
to have an inclination,
which at the same time
is contrary to his inclination:
for that is to suppose him
not to be inclined to
that which he is inclined to.

What's this mean?

It is absurd to claim
that a person may sincerely desire
to obey commands
that by his failure to obey,
he shows he does not want to obey.

Lest anyone think that this is a contradiction
of Paul's statements in Romans 7,
recall our discussion from week 3,
when we distinguished between
general desires unfronted by a choice,
and
specific desires when directly confronted
with having to make a choice.

It's impossible to do justice
to Edwards next 3 observations
without quoting quite a bit from him,

so here we go.

2. That which is called
a “desire” and “willingness”
for those inward duties
in such as do not perform them,
has respect to these duties
only indirectly and remotely,
and is improperly so called.
Not only because
(as was observed before)
it respects those good volitions
only in a distant view,
and with respect to future time;
but also because evermore,
not these things themselves,
but something else that is alien and foreign,
is the object that terminates
these volitions and desires.

Edwards then gives two examples of what he means.
We’ll skip the first example,
which involves a drunkard,
and concentrate on the second example.

Consider
a man of an exceedingly corrupt and wicked heart,
who has no love to God and Jesus Christ,
but, on the contrary,
being very profanely and carnally inclined,
has the greatest distaste
of the things of religion,
and enmity against them.
Yet being of a family, that,
from one generation to another,
have most of them died, in youth,
of an hereditary consumption,
and so having little hope of living long;
and
having been instructed in the necessity
of a supreme love to Christ,
and gratitude for his death and sufferings,
in order to his salvation from eternal misery;
if under these circumstances he should,
through fear of eternal torments,
wish he had such a disposition;
but his profane and carnal heart remaining,
he continues still in his habitual distaste of,
and enmity to God and religion,
and wholly without any exercise of that love and gratitude
(as doubtless the very devils themselves,
notwithstanding all the devilishness of their temper,
would wish for a holy heart,
if by that means they could get out of hell).

In this case,
there is no sincere willingness
to love Christ
and choose him as his chief good.
These holy dispositions and exercises
are not at all the direct object of the will.

They truly share no part
of the inclination or desire of the soul,
but all is terminated on deliverance from torment.
And these graces and pious volitions,
notwithstanding this forced consent,
are looked upon
as in themselves undesirable;
as when a sick man
desires a dose he greatly abhors,
in order to save his life.

From these things it appears:
(here Edwards makes his 3rd and 4th observations)

3. That this indirect willingness
is not that exercise of the will
which the command requires;
but is entirely a different one;
being a volition of a different nature,
and terminated altogether on different objects;
wholly falling short of that virtue of will,
to which the command has respect,

4. This other volition,
which has only some indirect concern
with the duty required,
cannot excuse for the want of that goodwill itself,
which is commanded;
being not the thing
which answers and fulfills the command,
and being wholly destitute
of the virtue which the command seeks.

I realize that was quite long,
but **can someone try to give a quick summary,
even if it is quite incomplete?**

The basic idea is,
I think,
that there's a profound difference
between wanting to obey a command,
and wanting the benefits you might get
from obeying the command.

Does that make sense?

We need one more fairly lengthy quote from Edwards
to wrap up this discussion of sincerity.

That which is real and hearty

is often called sincere;
 whether it be in virtue or vice.
 Some persons are sincerely bad;
 others are sincerely good;
 and others may be sincere and hearty
 in things,
 which are in their own nature indifferent;
 as a man may be sincerely desirous
 of eating when he is hungry.

But being sincere,
 hearty,
 and in good earnest,
 is no virtue,
 unless it be in a thing that is virtuous.

A man may be sincere and hearty
 in joining a crew of pirates,
 or a gang of robbers.

When the devils cried out,
 and besought Christ not to torment them,
 it was no mere pretense;
 they were very hearty in their desires
 not to be tormented:
 but this did not
 make their will or desire virtuous.

And if men have sincere desires,
 which are in their kind and nature no better,
 it can be no excuse for the want of any required virtue.

And as a man's sincerity
 in such an indirect desire or willingness to do his duty,
 as has been mentioned,
 cannot excuse for the want of performance;
 so it is with endeavors
 arising from such a willingness.

The endeavors can have no more goodness in them,
 than the will of which they are the effect and expression.

And, therefore,
 however sincere and real,
 and however great a person's endeavors are;
 yea,
 though they should be to the utmost of his ability;
 unless the will from which they proceed
 be truly good and virtuous,
 they can be of no avail or weight
 whatsoever in a moral respect.

That which is not truly virtuous is,
 in God's sight,
 good for nothing:
 and so can be of no value,
 or influence,
 in his account,
 to make up for any moral defect.

For nothing can counterbalance evil,
 but good.

If evil be in one scale,
and we put a great deal into the other
of sincere and earnest desires,
and many and great endeavors;
yet,
if there be no real goodness in all,
there is no weight in it;
and so it does nothing
towards balancing the real weight,
which is in the opposite scale.
It is only like
subtracting a thousand noughts
from before a real number,
which leaves the sum just as it was.

Are there any questions
about this passage?

As I said at the beginning,
there are two more sections in Part III,
but we'll skip them,
so we'll say we've now finished that part.

Next week
we'll start Part IV,
Wherein the Chief Grounds
of the Reasonings of Arminians,
in Support and Defense of
the Forementioned Notions of Liberty,
Moral Agency, etc.
and Against the Opposite Doctrine,
Are Considered.

Please read the first 4 sections.
Also don't forget to read Romans 8-12,
and to ask folks to give you a definition
for "free will."