

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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1/25/26

Sermon Title: Willing to Believe

Sermon Text: Romans 7:15

Rom. 7:15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Main Point: True freedom of the will was lost in Adam's fall and can only be restored through God's grace in Christ, since apart from regeneration all human actions (even seemingly good ones) remain enslaved to sin and incapable of pleasing God.

Outline:

1. Mankind's Will Before the Fall – Able to Sin, Able Not to Sin
2. Mankind's Will After the Fall (Apart from Christ) – Not Able Not to Sin
3. Mankind's Will After the Fall (In Christ) – Able Not to Sin
4. Mankind's Will in Glory – Not Able to Sin

Introduction

We are exactly four weeks into a new year. By now, the shiny optimism of January 1st has likely worn off. We made lists of what we *wanted* to do. But if you are like most people, you have already found yourself doing the exact opposite. This experience—of resolving to be one way but acting another—is not just a lack of discipline. It is a spiritual issue.

And this crisis is really at the center of our verse from Paul today, because the question of free will and of having desires that conflict with what we end up doing

is really at the center of this verse from Paul – this thing that has him so distressed in our passage today. Because here Paul says, “there’s this thing that I want.” And you would think that if I want to do something, then I will do that thing. But there’s a serious short-circuit between the thing that Paul knows and wants... and the output that actually happens.

And the thing that Paul talks about is this disjunction between the man he knows he should be—the man he wants to be, and the man who comes out so often in his actions and in his life.

What we’re talking about here is the will.

And as we think about this conflict, I think we can arrive at a definition of the will here. So here is what I think Paul uses as his concept of the will based on what we see here.

Our will is the part of our soul that embraces what our reason has approved of. It’s the part of us that makes choices, but it follows our judgments about what is good or bad.

And in a properly functioning will, we not only *want* what is good, but we also *do* what is good. So the ideal person is someone who does what he wants, and he only wants the good.

The problem is, Paul isn’t there yet in this passage. This is Paul speaking in the midst of his malfunction.

And I am sure that if you are a Christian you have struggled with this question: I do read God’s word, and I want to be like Christ, I want to love God fully, I want to follow him faithfully. But why does that keep “not happening”?

And the answer is that our wills ever since the fall of Adam and Eve have not been fully freed from sin. They are still influenced by sinful desires and they still are enslaved to sin.

Romans 7 from here on out is very much a passage that is focused on the Christian’s battle with his own indwelling sin; and Paul pictures it as this ongoing battle that often leaves the believer frustrated. You’re going to see Paul’s frustration as we go further into this passage. And we’re going to be very focused

on where he goes with that this next week. But for today, I thought we should talk about this question of free will. And the way we'll do that is by focusing on the four states of the human will.

The first is the state of Adam and Eve's will before the fall. After that we'll look at the state of our will after the fall. And then third we'll ask what has changed for a fallen person once we have come to Christ. Finally we will get really joyful because we're going to talk about what our will is going to be like in glory. All four of these are what we call the fourfold state of man.

But I think this is probably the most helpful way to get us to think about ourselves, and about the man who is wrestling with his own sin here in Romans chapter 7. I want to stay close to the text of Scripture as we speak about this so that this doesn't drift off into philosophical language, and so that you can see that what we're talking about here doesn't come from some philosopher, but really that it comes from God's word.

1. Mankind's Will Before the Fall - Able to Sin, Able Not to Sin

The first state of man that we need to consider is our state before the fall. In Adam and Eve's original state they were able to sin, but they were also able not to sin.

In the book of Ecclesiastes 7:29, the teachers says, "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." So humanity was created good. We were morally upright.

Sometimes people will see the evil of the world and think, "Why did God make us like this?" Or somebody might feel sinful desires, and feel guilty or ashamed and say, "Why did God make *me* like this?" And the beginning of an answer is, "He didn't. He created us good and righteous."

Adam was good, he was able to obey. But here is the key: he was also capable of *disobeying*. He had a capacity for both. His will was upright but it was also changeable. In the garden of Genesis 2, God told Adam and Eve they could eat of any tree except the one: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The presence of this command implied a freedom within Adam and Eve to obey or disobey. They

weren't bound to obey, they weren't slaves to sin. They did not have to take the fruit. They weren't forced to it by the serpent or even themselves.

But they did disobey. In Genesis 3, they were deceived by the serpent, but they were also deceived by themselves. They believed lies about God, and so disobeyed. And we could go very deep into the subject of the fall of mankind at this point, but what I want us to see is simply this: that before sin, our will was free to love and obey God; but our will was also able to disobey and hate God.

And this is crucial: something about that changes after the fall.

2. Mankind's Will After the Fall (Apart from Christ) - Not Able Not to Sin

And so the second state of man is our state after the fall. In this state mankind became not able not to sin. We were left with only one ability: the ability to sin. We lost the ability to not sin.

A change takes place in Adam and Eve after the fall happens. You can see the change in them almost immediately. They take the fruit, and the alienation from God begins. They hide themselves; they cover themselves. Something is very different now. They are now afraid of God. They are aware of their nakedness. They know their shame. And so what happens is really a fundamental change not only in their whole constitution, but in their relationship to God. They are against him, and they see him as being against them, too. They're afraid. That never happened before.

After the Fall, we start to see descriptions of humanity in Scripture that really might shock us. We are so used to thinking of ourselves as free, but after the fall in Genesis, Scripture starts using this language of bondage and slavery.

After the fall, the will remains natural but enslaved to sin. Man still chooses freely according to his desire, but his desires are in the driver's seat. And after the fall our desires are corrupt and unable please God now. Think of Paul even in just this passage. Does this sound like a free person? "I am of the flesh, sold under sin... I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability" (Rom. 7:14-18). This was St. Augustine's classic text for showing that our will isn't free, but instead that it is enslaved to our desires. You might think, "Well maybe that was just later on." But

Genesis 6:5 offers this description of mankind: “Every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” The Scripture writers don’t go easy on us.

When Paul is talking about fallen mankind apart from Christ, he uses this term “natural man.” Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God.” He’s talking about an unsaved person whose fundamental heart orientation is against God.

So Paul is giving us another glimpse of the enslaved will: it hears true and good things. It hears the things of the Spirit of God (maybe even the preaching of the gospel), but Paul says that the fallen natural will doesn’t accept these things when it hears them. Our hearts naturally reject what God says. Why? Because our will isn’t free to obey the good. It’s enslaved. After the fall, humanity still has the power of choice but not the moral freedom to choose the *good*. We sin freely but cannot bring ourselves to freely love God, because we don’t love or desire him. And we are enslaved to those fallen desires.

John 8:34: “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” Again, you notice here that the will is *active*. We decide, we choose. When we say we don’t have free will, we’re not saying that we don’t choose or make choices. We’re not saying we become robots who don’t know what we’re doing. But we are saying what Jesus says here, that we make the choices within a range of options that are only restricted to our sinful desires.

When I was a kid, we had a dog named Snoopy. And Snoopy had this little fenced in area of the yard, and he constantly lived there in this little cage. And he would pace the cage, and walk around in this maybe six foot square area. Was Snoopy free? Well in the sense that he could go wherever he wanted in the cage, yes. But could he go outside of the bounds? No. Not unless someone let him out. That’s kind of like us apart from God’s grace. Apart from God opening the cage and settings us free. We do what we want within our bondage.

Because of the fall, Scripture tells us things about our heart that we don’t want to hear. God tells us that “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9). We are not functioning rightly. We don’t love rightly, we don’t will rightly, and because of that we don’t live rightly.

It goes down to the level of the heart. And that's why it isn't enough that the people of this world simply "behave themselves" and are kind to one another (on the surface). The reason is that the Scriptures tell us that "without faith, it is impossible to please God."

And this is very important. I've been saying that after the Fall we can't please God, we don't love God, we don't want God. And you might think, "I know my neighbors. They're good folks." Just the other day, for no reason, Julia got home from throwing paint on the ICE building downtown to bring me cookies!

But there's a difference between pleasing God – doing a good deed – and just being a nice person. And the difference comes down to motive and purpose.

The authors of Scripture tell us that a truly good deed is done from a love of God. And this is something that by nature people really cannot do. It reaches down to the level of the heart. And one key verse for this is Romans 3:10: "No one is righteous...no one seeks for God."

What is real righteousness? What's a good deed? It is a deed that is in keeping with God's law out of a desire and love for Him.

True goodness is defined not by outward appearance but by its source and aim — love for God and faith in Him. Scripture teaches that a truly good deed is done in love for God, through faith in Him, and for His glory. "Lord, I want to please you." Therefore, even seemingly virtuous acts apart from faith are not truly good in God's sight. They might be on a horizontal level. As far as I'm concerned, Julia's cookies are amazing. But God sees the heart. And when someone does an outwardly good deed, but not because of a love for God, he says, "this is not what real righteousness looks like."

Now, thanks to God's common grace, our neighbors do not behave as badly as they could, but apart from the Spirit's work in their hearts, everything they do is ultimately corrupt and separated from God.

This is why Paul describes fallen mankind as "dead in trespasses and sins..." he says that apart from Christ we are "by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:1-3). Dead people do not will themselves to life. A dead person has reached the end of what

he can do, or desire, or accomplish. His life is only going in one direction. Unless something happens... something wonderful.

3. Mankind's Will After the Fall (In Christ) - Able Not to Sin

This takes us to the third state of man's will, which is man's will after the fall, but also after coming to Christ.

Here's what happens: we hear the bad news of point 2, and apart from the gospel – apart from God's grace, that's a pretty dark place for the story to end, right? It's really just a moral dead end.

And Imagine that: the story just ends with sad mankind, enslaved to our fallen wills, and unable to love God or do any good. *Man*, what a bummer.

But even in the Old Testament God began promising his people something else. He acknowledged their hard hearts. He acknowledged how deceptive their fallen hearts were. But then he began talking about bring them a rescue from this situation. In Ezekiel 36:26–27, God promises his people, "I will give you a new heart... and cause you to walk in my statutes." So you notice that God's answer to our messed up wills isn't, "I'm going to show you that you are enough. I'm going to get you to look within and find your inner strength." No, the promise from God is, *HE* is going to do something. The solution, he says, is to receive "a new heart." The word theologians use for this is regeneration. Another word for this is "new birth."

And we need the new birth because it's God who does the heart work that we so desperately need. He is the one whose Spirit causes us to be born again. It's a work of God, not of us. Right? And it can't be us, because our wills are enslaved. We need the Spirit to change us. Why do we need that? Because we're flesh. And Jesus says "that which is born of flesh is flesh." So if our problem *is* our flesh – our fallen hearts – then we need the Spirit. The answer's not more of us. "You must be born again," Jesus tells Nicodemus.

To be born again means that God takes a sinner, enlightens his mind, removes the heart of stone, gives him a heart of flesh, and renews the will, now making us willing to be good, and even giving us a desire to please God that we didn't have

before. Romans 6:17–18: “You who were slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart... set free from sin.”

Now, you might think, “I’m still struggling with sin. So what gives?” And this is the natural place for me to start talking about the struggle between flesh and spirit in the life of the believer, but I am going to save much of that for next week.

For the moment I just want you to see the change that takes place in our wills between before, when we didn’t know Christ and weren’t born again... and now when we do know Christ and we are born again.

Regeneration restores the will’s freedom toward the good. We receive back the original ability Adam and Eve had to obey God. Believers still struggle with sin, but the Spirit renews the will so that now we can truly love and obey God. So here’s the thing: when we are born again, we are freed from the dominion of sin, but not from the presence of sin. This is why Paul describes the believer in Galatians 5:16 like this: “The flesh lusts against the Spirit... so that you may not do the things you would.”

So now there is conflict in our heart. But guess what? Before we followed Christ, there was no conflict in our hearts. We loved ourselves. We might feel shame or guilt, but it wasn’t with reference to God. It was with reference to ourselves.

When we are born again and trust in Jesus Christ, God’s spirit changes our hearts so that our will is now liberated from sin’s dominion but not yet from its presence; believers now truly will the good by the Spirit’s power. We are still able to sin. But now we are able not to sin as well. We are still able to sin, but we also now have the ability to please God – not through our own moral efforts, but through faith which is enabled by God’s Spirit who is at work in us to will and to do according to his good pleasure.

That’s all I’m going to say about this for the moment, but next week we are going to talk more about this, because this third point is where all of us live if we are followers of Jesus. And it’s a life of struggle against our own sin. And the rest of Romans is really devoted to helping us in this battle here between being born again, and when we enter glory.

4. Mankind's Will in Glory - Not Able to Sin

And this takes us to the fourth state of mankind. One that none of us here fully enjoy yet, but which we should be incredibly excited to experience: and that is mankind's will in glory when we will finally be not able to sin, and will no longer even have the ability to sin at all.

The Apostle John, in 1 John 3:2 points to what we will be like in glory. He says, "We shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

We shall be like him. And John means, we'll be like him in a way we aren't quite yet. We'll be different than we are right now. Because right now, we want the good, but often don't do the good. There's a battle. Life for the believer is a battle between our great enemies, the world, the flesh, and the devil. But something better is coming. Later in Romans 8:30 Paul will tell us that "those whom he justified he also glorified." So here you and I are now, we trust in Jesus, we're justified. We have peace with God. We aren't afraid. We don't fear his condemnation. Amazing!

But one day, we will be what he calls "glorified." We will be made glorious. We will be completely purged of all sin and of any desire to ever sin again. We won't want to. We'll be like Jesus.

There's coming a day when God will change our hearts completely. Even the slightest presence of sin will be banished from us forever. And in glory, we will never want to sin again. In that sense, we won't have free will as some think of it. Right? We'll be chained to our desires, but our desires will be only for what is good, and for what pleases the king. And no one in heaven will complain, "God, I'd really like to be able to sin."

Absolutely not. And God tells us what the heavenly city will be like, and John tells us in Revelation 21:27, "Nothing unclean will ever enter [the heavenly city]." This is not a promise that none of us will go into the heavenly city; it's a promise that we won't always be unclean! Sin will not always be present in us.

And I want you to know, Christian, that in the glorified state, our will is going to be perfectly and unchangeably free in righteousness. We as God's saints will not sin because in glory we will finally be perfectly united to God and see Him as He is.

I think meditating on the future state in glory really helps us to understand free will. Because if you think of free will as being able to do *anything*, period, then you would have to admit that in heaven we won't be free. Because we'll never sin, and we'll never even want to sin. So we won't be able to do *anything*. That would just put us back like we were in the garden. But in the garden we did have the possibility of sinning.

In heaven we won't have that possibility. We won't even want it. We'll only be able to do what we most want at any given moment. And what we'll always want most is to please God. That's why I think the best definition of free will is "the ability to do what we most want at a given moment." And in glory, we will never want to sin ever again. We will finally be completely free of sin's presence once and for all.

Conclusion

We will talk more fully about what it means to be glorified later in Romans chapter 8. And maybe what I've said seems a bit overly philosophical. But let me see if I can rescue us from that here as we conclude. In Philippians 3:20 Paul says this: "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior... who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body." So the promise here is, we will one day have a glorified body like Jesus' body.

But we will also have a changed and glorified soul as well.

I apologize if you're heard me tell this story. But when my dad was on his deathbed almost 25 years ago, I asked him what he was most excited about when he thought about heaven. And he just leaned back, his shoulders dropped, he became really relaxed (which was rare) and I saw him almost seem relieved, and he said, "I can't wait to never be able to sin again."

It was the thing he hated most about himself.

I feel like he just preached my whole fourth point here. We can go home now, you know?

In glory, our will is going to be confirmed in perfect righteousness — still free, but unable to turn away from the supreme good any longer. And that is the fourth and final state of mankind. And it's what believers yearn for most.

Not being able to sin in heaven really is glorious and amazing and exciting. If you know your own sin and you have Christ's spirit, then you live with incredible anticipation of that day. But even our sinlessness in heaven isn't an end in itself.

Here's the real reason you want to be made holy, and free of sin: it's because it allows us to truly know, see, and enjoy God finally, without anything in our way. No sin, no sneaky motives, no twisted desires. Simply to behold the face of God.

To see his glory. To be transformed. To have a will that is conformed to his will. That is the story of redemption, isn't it? It's the thing we were made for.

You see, God places the man and woman in the garden, with the possibility of sinning, and they do. And in doing so, they lose the ability to obey apart from his grace. But then God sends his son to bear our sins, carry our sorrow, destroy our shame, and to quicken our hearts by his spirit, changing us and taking our heart of stone, giving us a heart of flesh. But even then his final work, when completed, is to change our will to be like his, that we may see him as he is.

Let's pray.