

God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom

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[0 : 00] We've been talking about predestination and we're doing a lesson this evening on that we're going to finish that part up next Monday.

! That's my intention when I talk about the problem of free will and the sin nature! Inherited from Adam in his fall in the garden, but that's for next time.

One of the problem areas that we dealt with last week is if God is sovereign, and he is, how can evil exist in the world?

You've got a sovereign God, he's in control of everything, and yet we have evil.

He does justice to most, but he does give mercy to some, and he does it based on his good pleasure. But all of us deserve justice.

[1 : 37] That's made abundantly clear in the Bible. Some do receive mercy through the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ, thank goodness. And we then went to some length in explaining how this is not unfair, though people think of it as unfair, and treat it as though it were unfair.

Well, tonight I want to mention another problem area when we talk about God's sovereignty. And that's the sovereignty of God in human freedom.

Every true Christian believes in the sovereignty of God. And that's a broad statement. Broad statement. How can I justify that?

Well, there are millions of true believers in the world. And, after all, surely there's one who rejects the sovereignty of God. Well, maybe so, but I can prove to him that he actually believes in the sovereignty of God.

And I make that statement for this reason. Every true Christian prays.

[2 : 49] That is an affirmation of the belief in the sovereignty of God. In our prayers, we ask for certain things, like forgiveness of sins, help for our family, help for the church, guidance in our daily lives, and so forth.

Only a sovereign God can supply such things. We know that going in. So we really are affirming a belief in God's sovereignty when we pray.

We're praying to a higher power, a higher being. So if you pray, you're expressing a belief in the sovereignty of God. Now, people have, over the years, tried to come up with suitable examples to neatly explain God's sovereignty and human freedom.

And one of the most common expressions is that God's sovereignty and human freedom are like two parallel lines. Remember that in geometry?

On earth, they run parallel to each other. And in geometry, they never meet. But then, people say, but in heaven, they meet.

[4 : 14] They intersect. Well, that sounds pretty neat. But there's a problem with that analogy. If two parallel lines ultimately meet, they were never parallel lines to begin with.

They can't meet. Even geometry confirms that. And I did really well in geometry. I did horrible in every other math. But I did really well in geometry.

I enjoyed it. And there was a real smart girl next to me. Spurgeon used that analogy. A.W. Pink used that analogy.

Another analogy which I first heard from the teachings of R.C. Sproul was that of ropes. Some argue that on the surface, it appears that two ropes going down into a well are separate.

However, down deep in this well, near the bottom, they actually come together. If that is true, then the theory of two ropes only remains a theory because in reality, there's one rope.

[5 : 33] It turns out examples like this are nothing more than contradictions which may give us a measure of relief because they seem to make sense.

But are there genuine contradictions between God's sovereignty and human freedom? If such contradictions exist, we have a real problem.

We have a problem. And the chief problem is that God is never the author of confusion. And a contradiction is confusion.

And God's never the author of confusion. If sovereignty excludes freedom and freedom excludes sovereignty, then either God is not sovereign or mankind is not free.

And we're going to be getting into this even more next week. So let's search for an alternative and in so doing, eliminate the seeming contradiction.

[6 : 35] Now, we have in this world monarchies. Probably the one that we most know about is the rule of Queen Elizabeth.

She is the monarch over Great Britain. That's England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Used to be other nations, but they opted out. South Africa, for instance, and Rhodesia and other places.

She is also the monarch, by the way, over Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. These lands are ruled by a sovereign monarch, but at the same time, there's great freedom for their people.

Tremendous titanic freedoms. Freedom does not cancel out sovereignty, nor does sovereignty cancel out freedom. They can coexist together.

What cannot coexist with sovereignty is autonomy. Now we have another term that is introduced into our lesson, and we've got to define that.

[7 : 45] What is autonomy? Well, it's made up of two words being auto and nomos, and those are real simple to define. Auto is not an automobile, although it relates to that.

Auto means self. We use the term automoto to mean a machine that can move itself. That's a little misnomer. You've got to do some things, like step on the gas and have gas in the tank and yada yada yada.

We have to drive it, unless of course it's broken. But we don't have to push it to get it to go forward. Nomos is the Greek word for law. We have to bring the two words together, and we have the concept of self-law.

A law unto yourself, if you will. In other words, autonomous means we become a law unto ourselves. An autonomous person will be someone who answers to no one.

And we don't even have that in human relations, much less in our relationship with God. In fact, it is an impossibility and a contradiction to have a sovereign God and a completely autonomous person.

[9 : 05] Whether that person is a believer or unbeliever. When I played football, my coaches were fond of talking about an immovable object and an irresistible force.

That was a big example. And that sounded really great to an 18-year-old offensive lineman. But in actuality, those things don't exist.

If an immovable object moves, it wasn't immovable. If the irresistible force moved it, it was not irresistible to begin with.

It wasn't irresistible. This simple example is a good description of sovereignty and autonomy. If God is sovereign, then man is not autonomous.

If man is autonomous, then God cannot be sovereign. These are true contradictions. It reminds me of a fictional story of a group of scientists that came together.

[10 : 10] And they met with God. And they said, we don't need you to create life. We can do this on our own. And said, we got a laboratory and we can do a great job of creating the basics of life, the building blocks of life.

In other words, they were autonomous. And they said, all we got to do is bring together some dirt, some water, zap it with electricity, create amino acids, the building blocks of life.

So God accepted their challenge. And the scientists went and they took a jar and they started scooping up some dirt. And at that point, God intervened and he said, no, use your own dirt.

Don't use mine. You go create some dirt on your own and use that. And at that point in this fictional story, the scientists realized that they were not quite as autonomous as they first thought.

The fact is, you do not have to be autonomous to be free. I say that because autonomy implies absolute freedom and nobody has that level of freedom.

[11 : 24] Nobody. Take myself, for example. Far from being autonomous, I am answerable to all sorts of things and people.

I mean, we are all answerable to several governments. Several governments at one and the same time. I mean, in Barthesville, we are answerable to the city government, to the county government, probably to the water district.

We are answerable to the state government. We are answerable to the United States. I am answerable to my wife, my boys, my granddaughters, my church, and ultimately and supremely to God.

So, far from being autonomous, I answer to everybody. Let me tell you about an absurd statement that has been floating around for a number of years.

It is that God's sovereignty cannot restrict human freedom. No true Christian would ever make a statement like that or even believe that.

[12:30] God can and does place restrictions on human freedom. He can impose moral limits. God even reserves the right to remove us from this earth through death.

He has the right, the power to do that. And I have talked to ministers who really believed that God did that in their world. I remember when Dr. Saucier was our pastor and he had a guy in his church who told him, he said, my sole goal in life is to get you out of this church and out of ministry. I remember his name. His name was Ed. And Ed used to get up at four o'clock in the morning. The parsonage was right next door to the church. He'd go over to the church to pray until sun up. And he said, as I got older, I didn't do that. I thought that was required of ministers for some reason. But he would go over there and he would pray. And then one morning he got around to praying about Ed.

And it had been pretty tough that weekend at church with Ed. And Monday morning at five o'clock, he said, Lord, I can't deal with Ed anymore. I'm just asking that you intervene.

[13:47] You do something because I can't handle it. And he only got that statement out on the phone when he was chairman of the deacons. And he said, hey, I'm at the emergency room. Ed just died.

So Ed hung up and got back on. He says, God, I didn't mean kill him. I meant move him to First Baptist. I didn't ask you to kill him. But Ed got removed.

I talked to a minister up in Dewey years ago. And he was convinced a guy in his church got removed. In my father-in-law's church, they had a guy named Willie. And I knew him.

He was horrible. And all of a sudden, Willie was gone. He fell over dead. Did God do it? I don't know. I mean, that's what the Almighty knows. But so God even reserves the right to remove. And we're talking about believers from this earth. And the true statement is the reverse of the previous. And human freedom can never restrict the sovereignty of God.

[14:52] We could not restrict God's sovereignty by an exercise of our freedom. If we could do that, then God would not be sovereign. Man would be sovereign. Man would be sovereign.

God is free. Man is free. But there's a catch. God is a whole lot freer than I am.

I've got some freedom. You've got some freedom. But God's freedom is far beyond our freedom. If my freedom and God's freedom clash, God is going to win that battle.

God is going to. And it kind of reminds me of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Supreme Court justice. They asked him. He was in the 1800s. Fought in the Civil War. In fact, Abraham Lincoln used to take a carriage to the front lines and go up and observe the battle.

And one day, of course, Lincoln was tall. One day, he's standing up looking at the battle. The South had sharpshooters. Man, they were snipers. And this guy yells at me, hey, you dummy, get down.

[15:57] And that was Oliver Wendell Holmes yelling at Abraham Lincoln, later the Supreme Court justice. And Oliver Wendell Holmes said they asked him his secret to success. He said, I learned at an early age that I wasn't God.

I had to testify to a grand jury one time. And they got on the subject of the district attorney, not the present one, one that we had a lot of trouble with years ago, 30 years ago. And they said, well, what's the matter with that guy? And I said, he, and I told him the story about Oliver Wendell Holmes.

And I said, our DA hasn't figured that out yet. He hasn't come to the realization that he's not God. He thinks he is. It went over pretty well with the grand jury. They really cited him for some bad things.

So God is free, man is free, but God is freer. When my boys were growing up, they had free freedom. They had free will. And I had free will.

And when our wills clashed, mine trump theirs. Mine trump theirs. Now, Diane's will still trumps theirs. And they're 44 and 40.

[17:01] But it doesn't bother. That's not an issue with Diane. The problem is that thinking of divine sovereignty and human freedom immediately sounds like a contradiction in terms.

But are they? So to explore that further, and this is especially important as we move into deeper into our study this year. I'm going to briefly mention four terms.

We're not going to do an exhaustive study of these. But I'm going to mention contradiction. But I'm going to mention contradiction. Paradox. A word that is probably not familiar to all of us.

Antinomy. And mystery. A contradiction. There is the law of contradiction.

And basically it states that something cannot be what it is. And at the same time, be what it is not. That would be a contradiction.

[18:05] That would violate the law of, or that would be an example of the law of contradiction. Or violating the law of contradiction. A man can be a father, and a man can be a son, and a man can be a grandfather.

There's a bunch of us in here like that. A whole bunch of us. But no man can be a man, and at the same time, be not a man.

Now we live in a culture where they're trying to achieve that. But it's a house of cards, I can tell you. And the fact is that some of our culture are tampering with this due to gender identity, which is itself a contradiction.

Contradictions cannot exist side by side, even in the mind of God. If we think we have found a contradiction in the Bible, we have come up short in our understanding.

There are no contradictions in the Word of God, because the Holy Spirit, the author of the Bible, cannot contradict himself.

[19:17] He's fully God, and God cannot contradict himself. We do have, though, paradox. A paradox is an apparent contradiction.

You have two pieces of information. And upon closer examination, you bring those two together, even Bible knowledge, something over here, something over there, well that seems to be a paradox, you bring them together and they're resolved.

Oh, well, I see that now. Yeah, that makes sense. There may be an apparent paradox of information in the Bible, but when all the relevant facts are brought together, the issue is resolved, the paradox goes away.

Now, there's a word, antinomy. That comes from Great Britain. And I'm told they use that every now and then in conversation. When's the last time you used that in normal American English?

You know, well, I think that's an antinomy. I've never used that other than to teach. At one time it was used extensively in Britain. It was almost never used in America.

[20:29] Basically, an antinomy exists where there is a paradox, and when all relevant facts are brought to bear on the subject, there still appears to be, and underline that thought up here, there still appears to be a paradox, although there really is not.

We just do not have the depth of understanding of God. An antinomy is an apparent incompatibility between two truths.

An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable.

You can see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together. I'm going to try and give you an example.

There is an apparent opposition between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, or to put it more biblically, between what God does as king and what he does as judge.

[21:43] Scripture teaches us that as king he orders and controls all things, human actions among them, in accordance with his own eternal purpose.

Scripture also teaches that as judge he holds every man responsible for the choices that he makes and the course of action he pursues.

God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are taught side by side in the same Bible, sometimes in the same text. Both are thus guaranteed to us by the same divine authority, the Holy Spirit.

Both therefore are true. It follows that they must be held together and not played off against each other. Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is also divinely controlled.

Man is divinely controlled, though he is also a responsible moral agent. God's sovereignty is a reality and our responsibility is also a reality.

[22 : 55] This is the revealed antinomy in terms of what we have to do our thinking about when we come to evangelism. And the great Dr. Packer wrote a book called *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*.

And he perfectly described all this. And I made a hunt all over my house. I've owned ten copies of that and I keep giving them away.

And I couldn't find it. I called Rob because he is fond of stealing my books. And he didn't have it. So I gave up. But I would highly recommend that book. It's a great book.

It's a fantastic book. Well, then we have mystery. There are certain things in the Bible that are mystery or mysterious. The term mystery refers to something that is true, but we don't understand it.

The Trinity is a mystery. I mean, I believe in the Trinity, but do not understand the concept at any level of significant human intelligence.

[24 : 04] God is one, but three. That is difficult or impossible to wrap our minds around. The same is true of the incarnation.

God became a man and continued to be God. Christ, the second person of the Trinity, became the unique God-man. Describe that in 25 words or less.

There are things in the Bible that were previously considered mysteries, but after more divine light was shed on them, the mystery was solved.

Or as Clouseau would say, solve it. But it got solved. And Paul gives a great example of that in the New Testament. He says, the church was a mystery.

The Jewish prophets didn't see it. They wrote about it. They said, God's going to bring light to the Gentiles. But they didn't understand. They had no concept of the church.

[25 : 03] It was a mystery. And a mystery is something previously hidden. And now it has been brought into light. And I believe in heaven, many mysteries will be revealed to us.

And we will have understanding. But I also think some things in heaven will remain a mystery. Again, citing the Trinity, the incarnation.

Mysteries are true, but not necessarily fully understood. Contradictions are always mysterious, but are never true as it relates to Scripture.

Why do I bring all this up? Because God's sovereignty and human freedom are a mystery. They might be a paradox.

They might even be an antinomy at times. But they are not contradictions. There are not contradictions in the Bible. Both are taught in God's Word and therefore we have to believe it.

[26 : 04] Even if we don't fully understand, we have to believe it. This all leads to another though related topic under the heading of predestination. And that again is human free will.

We hear the word free will often and many hold on to it fiercely. Many also cling to it erroneously and have a mistaken view of just what it is.

And that's especially true in the spiritual realm. I'm going to take a stab at a definition. Free will is the ability to make choices without any prior prejudice, inclination or disposition.

To almost every human on earth, free will is very appealing. People like it. To most people, free will flows from a position of neutrality.

You're neutral. Something comes in. You exercise your free will. You make a decision. You go to the right. You go to the left. Neutrality is an important term in any discussion of human free will.

[27 : 11] It means our choice or our choices are devoid of coercion. We can turn to the right or the left by an exercise of free will. That's true.

As appealing as the possession and exercise of free will is to the human psyche, there are some problems lurking in the shadows. If we truly make choices from a position of neutrality that are uninfluenced, then why do we make choices at all?

If they haven't been influenced, why make the choice? If that is true and we don't have any reason to make a choice, then we make our choices, but they don't have any moral significance.

We didn't need to make it. So why did we make it? If as secular philosophers say our choices just pop out and therefore cannot be judged good or bad, then we're really in the deep end of the pool. Hitler chose to kill Jews with catastrophic results that reverberate down to our day. But he made a free will choice.

[28 : 18] Yeah, I'm going to kill Jews. Something a little less dramatic, but B.F. Skinner, a sociologist, I'm sure he's long dead by now. I hope he has risk with his soul.

I had to read one of his books, or I was supposed to in college, and he used an example in there. A little old lady trying to cross the street. Traffic is heavy.

No street light. A man comes up and says, man, let me help you across. He takes her. He walks her across. She gets safe the other side. B.F. Skinner said, he's done the right thing.

He's made a moral decision within himself to help her. That's a correct path. But another man comes up. She's trying to get across. In the process of leading her, he steals her purse, gets her to the other side, hits her in the head so she doesn't call the police.

She's laying on the sidewalk. He runs off with her money. He said, he's done good. That's a moral choice. He has the right to make a moral choice. In B.F. Skinner's world, there's no God to judge that.

[29 : 21] See what I'm saying? Well, that's absurd, of course. That's ridiculous. Better not hear it in front of me. God evaluates our choices based upon our motives for making them.

And God is deeply concerned about motives. And since God is concerned about our motives, we should be concerned about our motives.

So the first problem we are faced with in the exercise of free will is what is our motive from the view of the judge of the universe.

That's the mindset we need to have. When you're making a significant decision for yourself, your family, I want to go down this path, that, and that. Maybe it's a path of sin.

I don't know. Maybe it's not. It's something else. I mean, the kids had it right back 15, 20 years ago. What would Jesus do? Do they still do that? They used to have these armbands.

[30 : 26] What would Jesus do? Jesus would do right. Jesus would do right. Now, we have a great biblical example we can insert at this point.

And that's the story of Joseph and his brothers in the book of Genesis. The brothers of Joseph believed themselves to have great motivation to sell Joseph into slavery.

And by the way, that was a compromise. Originally, they were going to kill him. And one of the brothers said, we're not going to go that way. So we'll just sell him into slavery.

It's a slower death. Their father had lavished love on Joseph more so than on them. They felt they were second-class citizens in their father's world.

That's another lesson here, guys. They considered Joseph a spy because their dad said, report to me what they're doing or what they're saying. They did not want to be accused of murdering their brother.

[31 : 31] So they made a free will choice, I've got that in quotations, to sell him into slavery. And now we have injected into the story an economic motive.

They're going to make some money on this deal with the slave traders. And we all know the story. There were many ups and downs in the life of Joseph in Egypt.

He ends up in prison even. You remember all those stories. Years later, after he had become the number two person in the entire nation, answerable only to the Pharaoh, Joseph was reunited with his brothers.

And once they realized they were standing before Joseph, they assumed he was going to make a free will choice to have them killed, which he had the power to do under Egyptian law, under the Pharaoh.

But Joseph gave them this declaration in Genesis 50:20. You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.

[32 : 40] And that's another thing we have to consider. Where's God in everything we do and all the decisions we make and the prayers we offer? Where's God? What's God think about this?

God's motive, which is always good and always pure, trumped their motive, which was evil. In fact, it saved the Jewish race.

It saved Israel from famine. And God saw all that. So as we have seen, the exercise of so-called free will involves moral choices, whether good or bad.

They involve moral choices. There's a second problem here, area here, worthy of discussion. Not only does our free will choose morally, but does it choose rationally?

We should make moral decisions. Sometimes we don't. But they should also be rational. If we begin from a neutral position, why would we choose to turn to the right or to the left?

[33 : 47] And to explain this, I'm going to turn to an English author by the name of Charles Luckwich Dugson. Anybody ever heard of him?

I would hazard a guess that no one in here has ever heard of that name before. But I'd be willing to bet you've all heard of the book he wrote, because he wrote a book under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll.

And that book, the true title is Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, which has been shortened in our day to Alice in Wonderland.

Now, I never read the book itself, but I didn't have to because in the 1950s, Walt Disney came out with a full length cartoon, Alice in Wonderland.

And I went to the Arrow Theater. Anybody remember the Arrow Theater? I went to the Arrow Theater and watched it with my mom, or probably my dad, too.

[34 : 48] Now, let me do something that has anything to do with this class. But since I brought up the Arrow Theater, my mom used to teach art at the YWCA. It's a parking lot now for Phillips.

When I was five years old, my mom would take me to the Arrow Theater, take me inside, get me popcorn, a Coke, and a candy bar, sent me down and said, don't get out of your chair, Tommy. Watch the movie. I'll pick you up when it's over. I was five years old. My dad was in Arabia. I mean, I don't let my granddaughters walk out in the front yard unless I'm with them. Arrow Theater.

They also had the Arrow Theater. If you could bring your banking, you had a little room. A little room. Yeah. A baby room. A cry room. They call it a cry room.

It was, you know where Copeland Appliance is? Well, it's gone now. It's out here. The State Farm on the corner of Keeler and Frank Phillips.

[35 : 47] Straight across. But it's now part of the P.O.B. building and the cafeteria and all that. It was right there. It was right there. And we had a bunch of theaters. The Osage had burned down. The Larry, the Osage, and the Arrow.

Yeah, we had them. The Osage fell in and the Hill fell in. We had them. Oscar's been to all of them. Alice fell down a hole.

And that started a series of adventures with all sorts of characters. She came to a fork in the road and she didn't know which way to turn.

Suddenly there appeared above her head in a tree the smiling Chesser cat. Remember the Chesser cat? Alice asked him, which direction should I go?

And the Chesser cat said, that all depends. Where do you want to get to? That's pretty sound. Alice responded, well you know, I really don't care.

[36 : 52] To which the Chesser cat appropriately, accurately commented, then it doesn't matter which way you go. Isn't that great advice?

And we can see from this that Alice had a dilemma on her hands. And she has four options to choose from in making her decision.

She can take the left fork or the right fork. I've done what Yogi Berra always said. Come to the fork in the road, take it. But she could go to the left. She could go to the right.

She could turn around and go back the way she came. Or she could stay where she was at. We have a name for that. That's called the point of indecision.

And stay there until she died of starvation or lack of water. Just sit down there and sit there until you die. Dr. Sproul uses another example of neutral willed decision making using the example of a mule.

[37 : 56] And we have a name for him. He's the neutral willed mule. The owner of a mule places on either side of the animal a basket of oats and a basket of wheat.

If the mule doesn't have any desire to eat wheat or oats, he will choose neither. And he can stand there until he starves. If he has an equal disposition toward the oats or the wheat but can't choose between the two, he will starve.

So there he stands paralyzed due to lack of desire for the choices before him. He is totally neutral willed.

He has absolutely no motive and without motive there would be no choice. Without choice there would be no food. Without food there would be no mule.

He's going to disappear. Of course, what I would do if I were the mule, and I had a mule for many years, is eat both baskets of food and die from being overweight, but that wasn't one of the choices given in the example.

[39 : 02] So I couldn't come up with that. For Alice to go anywhere, she needed a reason. But in her case, the reason didn't exist.

The mule to chose needed a reason, but it didn't exist either. Thus we see the dangers and the fallacies of what is called the neutral will theory.

It is irrational, but it's also unbiblical. It's unbiblical. And we're going to look at the Christian definition of free will as given to us by some great theologians, and the greatest ever produced on American soil was Jonathan Edwards.

Tremendous man. He wrote a book called The Freedom of the Will. Interestingly, Martin Luther wrote a book entitled The Bondage of the Will. And here's the great shock.

Both sound as though they're in complete polar opposites of each other. In reality, they were both in total agreement. They were in total agreement.

[40 : 14] Luther said, we're in bondage. Edwards said, we have the freedom of the will, but it's in bondage to sin. So it's not as free as it looks.

So Edwards defined the will as the mind choosing. In order to make a moral choice, our mind needs to have some information on which to base the choice.

And we're going to examine this in some detail starting next time and inject in there our present status. Maybe I'll just say our present nature that arose in the Garden of Eden.

Chapter 3. So we're going to leave behind for tonight only the Chesser Cat and Alice and the neutral-willed mule and Reverend Jonathan Edwards.

Until next time. I'll see you next time! I'll see you next time!