

Theological Equipping Class

Divine Providence and Human Responsibility

February 2, 2025

Recap: Providence and the “Problem” of Evil

Concurrence: two or more parties can act in the same event and produce a given outcome without all parties having the same intent (what YOU meant for evil, GOD meant for good)

Who killed Jesus? Judas, Rome, Pilate, God?

Compatibilism: God’s sovereignty is compatible with human responsibility.

Theological Tension

- Trinity: Is God one or three?
- Hypostatic union: Is Jesus human or divine?
- Compatibilism: is God sovereign or is man actually culpable for his sin?

“Faith seeking understanding.” (Anselm of Canterbury)

“Unless you first believe, you won’t understand.” (Augustine of Hippo)

The Majesty of the Mystery

- “The aim of the theologian dealing with a mystery is to do away with phrases which diminish the mystery.” (Charles Journet)
- “Our theological grammar functions in part to preserve the integrity of the revealed mystery of God at precisely those points where human reason may be tempted to diminish it in an effort to render God more easily understood by the human intellect.” (James Dolezal)
 - “We are speaking of God. Is it any wonder if you do not comprehend? For if you comprehend, it is not God you comprehend. Let it be a pious confession of ignorance rather than a rash profession of knowledge. To attain some slight knowledge of God is a great blessing; to comprehend him, however, is totally impossible.” (Augustine of Hippo)
 - *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!* (Romans 11:33)
- Punting on 2nd down vs. going for it on 4th and 50

- The mystery/tension of compatibilism
 - God is absolutely sovereign & there are absolutely no limits to His sovereignty. At the same time, His sovereignty never functions to reduce or negate human responsibility.
 - Human beings are responsible creatures—that is, they choose, they believe, they disobey, they respond, & there is moral significance in their choices; but human responsibility never functions to diminish God’s sovereignty or to make God contingent.
 - *If, then, I find taught in one place that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find in another place that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is my folly that leads me to imagine that two truths can ever contradict each other.* (Charles Spurgeon)

The danger of swinging the pendulum:

- Stress sovereignty to the neglect of culpability: fatalism
- Stress responsibility to the neglect of sovereignty: libertarianism

A paradigm: compatibilism at the cross

- Who killed Jesus? Lots of ways to answer: Herod, Pilate, Jews, Sanhedrin in particular, Romans, Judas, the actual soldiers who crucified Him.
- Was God sovereign over it? Did He ordain and orchestrate it? Absolutely.
 - *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.* (Isaiah 53:4)
 - *Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.* (Isaiah 53:10)
 - *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?* (Romans 8:32)
 - *whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.* (Romans 3:25)

- But were people culpable? Absolutely.
 - Could blame Judas, after all, Jesus calls him the son of perdition and says he faces a greater judgment, but in addition, we could blame Herod, Pilate, the Roman soldiers, the Jewish crowd, the Sanhedrin, etc.
 - *So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."* (John 19:10–11)
 - *But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.* (Acts 3:14–15)
 - God holds Pilate and Judas and the Jewish elite and so forth responsible for sins which He Himself ordained.
- To understand compatibilism, you just have to embrace both of these truths: that God can be sovereign over something for which man is nonetheless responsible.
- In fact the Bible puts these two truths together in a couple of places:
 - *this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.* (Acts 2:23)
 - *for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.* (Acts 4:27–28)
- If we can grasp the concept of compatibilism when it comes to the cross, it isn't all that difficult to extrapolate and extend that image to an understanding of God's providence in general.

Divine Sovereignty

- Weather phenomena such as rain, snow and lightning (Job 37:6-13)
- The direction of the heavenly bodies (Job 38:31-32; Matthew 5:45)
- The distribution of food for animals (Job 38:39-41; Psalm 104:14, 27-29; Matthew 6:26)
- The life and death of animals (Matthew 10:29)
- The rise and fall of nations (Job 12:23; Psalm 22:28)
- The decisions of the leaders of nations (Proverbs 21:1)
- The times and places in which people live (Acts 17:26)
- The length of our lives (Job 14:5; Psalm 139:16)
- The fruitfulness of our wombs (Psalm 127:3)
- Seemingly random/chance occurrences (Proverbs 16:33)
- The direction of our every step (Proverbs 16:9; 20:24; Jeremiah 10:23; Philippians 2:13)
- The provision of everything that we have received (1 Corinthians 4:7)

- Job's suffering: God suggests Job and gives permission to Satan
- *Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. But he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few...* (Isaiah 10:5-7)
- *Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the LORD tormented him.* (1 Samuel 16:14)
- *Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you.* (1 Kings 22:23)
- *Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?* (Amos 3:6)
- *I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things.* (Isaiah 45:7)
- *Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?* (Lamentations 3:38-39)
- *all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"* (Daniel 4:35)

We should confess sovereignty in a way that is able to really believe:

- *...all things work together for good* (Romans 8:28)
- *He works all things according to the counsel of His will* (Ephesians 1:11)
- *He does whatever He pleases* (Psalm 115:3)
- *Whatever the LORD pleases He does.* (Psalm 135:5)

Human Responsibility

- The Bible presupposes that we will ask this question.
 - *You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? (Romans 9:19–21)*

- The importance of questions in Romans 9
 - *What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! (Romans 9:14)*

- Now, why does Paul say that? Why would the justice of God be in question?
 - *And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Romans 9:10–13)*
 - *For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. (Romans 9:15–16)*

- If Arminianism doesn’t prompt & explain Paul’s question then Arminianism doesn’t explain Paul’s point.

- *You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”*

Man's Culpability

- *I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:36–37)*
- *The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (Ezekiel 18:20)*
- *See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. (Ecclesiastes 7:29)*
- *Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. (James 1:13–14)*
- *Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, number Israel and Judah.” (2 Samuel 24:1)*
- *Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel. (1 Chronicles 21:1)*
- *If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?” But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death. (1 Samuel 2:25)*
- *Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. (Genesis 20:6)*
- *The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps. (Proverbs 16:9)*

What about free will?

- Libertarian free will: the power of contrary choice which says that humans are free to make choices which are unhindered or unencumbered by anything or anyone internal or external
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- Compatibilistic free will: humans are free to do according to their nature. We do not make choices contrary to our desires or natures

“Can we be free in the morally significant sense if all our acts, including our choices, are causally determined by antecedent events and/or states? Compatibilists say “yes”; incompatibilists say “no.””
(John Wingard Jr.)

What is freedom?

- By true freedom = the ability to love and serve God unencumbered by sin
- By freedom of choice = the ability of human beings to do as they desire
- What type of freedom do we have? Well, it depends on what you mean by we?
 - Human beings as *created* had true freedom and freedom of choice. Before the fall, there was no sin to limit our freedom. But we didn't stay in that state.
 - Human being as *fallen* lost true freedom and retained freedom of choice. We can do things that we want to do, but our will is always infected by the virus of sin.
 - Human beings as *redeemed* have regained a measure of true freedom and retained freedom of choice.
 - Human beings as *glorified* will be perfected in true freedom and will retain freedom of choice. At that time we will will nothing but good.
- *So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:31-36)*
 - Our eyes are blind to the glories of the gospel (Matthew 13:14-15; John 12:39-40; 2 Cor 4:4).
 - Our minds are darkened and hostile toward God (Romans 8:7; Ephesians 4:18; Colossians 1:21).
 - Our ears are deaf to the call of our Creator (Matthew 13:14-15).
 - Our hearts are darkened and deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 1:21).
 - We are enslaved to sin (John 8:34; Romans 6:17; Galatians 4:8).
 - We are foolish (Romans 1:21; Titus 3:3).
 - We hate God (John 3:19-20).
 - We are dead (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13).
- Is a blind man "free" to see or a deaf man "free" to hear? Is a dead man "free" to live?
- *Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil. (Jeremiah 13:23)*

How can God hold us responsible if we are not totally free?

- natural vs. moral inability
 - "...we allow that man has choice and that it is self-determined, so that if he does anything evil, it should be imputed to him and to his own voluntary choosing. We do away with coercion and force, because this contradicts the nature of the will and cannot coexist with it. We deny that choice is free, because through man's innate wickedness it is of necessity driven to what is evil and cannot seek anything but evil. And from this it is possible to deduce what a great difference there is between necessity and coercion. For we do not say that man is dragged

unwillingly into sinning, but that because his will is corrupt he is held captive under the yoke of sin and therefore of necessity will in an evil way. For where there is bondage, there is necessity. But it makes a great difference whether the bondage is voluntary or coerced. We locate the necessity to sin precisely in corruption of the will, from which follows that it is self-determined.” (John Calvin)

- “Again the sinner will perhaps say, “But why should the sentence be so severe? The law may be right in itself, but it is hard, or even impossible for me. I have no strength: I cannot love the Lord with all my heart. I am altogether insufficient for that which is good.” Oh that you would but consider what sort of inability you are under to keep the commandments of God. Is it natural, or is it moral? Is it really want of ability, or is it only want of will? Is it anything more than the depravity and corruption of your hearts, which is itself criminal, and the source of all actual transgressions? Have you not natural faculties, and understanding, will, and affections, a wonderful frame of body, and a variety of members? What is it that hinders them all from being consecrated to God?” (John Witherspoon)

- Jonathan Edwards: The Freedom of the Will

- Example 1: A drunk keeps on drinking at a bar. There is a sense in which he can stop (he possesses the physical ability), but not the moral ability because of his love of drink.
 - Example 2: A king has two men in prison. The first one desires to come and repent of his crimes, but he’s prevented by the bars. That’s a physical inability. Some people think that’s what Calvinism implies, but that’s not at all the case. Rather, Calvinism would be for the king to say that they can leave the prison if only they would repent and admit their crimes, but the second prisoner so hates the king that he refuses to leave. He is bound, but by His own will. It is a voluntary bondage.
- Example 3: suppose you place a bale of hay and a crate of vegetables before a lion. Will he eat them? No. Why not? He has the physical ability to do so, but his nature prevents him from doing so.
 - We are always limited by our nature. | Our nature limits our freedom. | My will is only as free as my nature allows.

Summary

- God is sovereign. Not an iota, not a dot, not a fraction of a molecule is outside His authority and providence and control and sovereignty. Even man’s sinful actions. No exceptions.
- You are responsible for your sin. You are culpable. Yes, you sin because you are a sinner. Yes, you are afflicted by original sin and can’t help but sin. Yes, sin is in your very spiritual DNA. You are responsible for it. God may ordain your sin, God may use your sin, but you are always culpable for your sin.
- And if those truths appear irreconcilable, don’t jettison one or the other, rather, embrace the mystery. Exult in the paradox..