

## FREE WILL

Text: John 6:44

Belgic Confession Art 14b

Reading: John 6:32-51; 1 Thess 4:13-18

Theme: A sinner does not have the desire or ability to choose God unless the Holy Spirit draws him to Christ.

Purpose: To show that the sinner cannot choose for God of his own will and that salvation is the work of the triune God.

Do men and women have a free will? This might sound like an easy question to answer, but this question has been the cause of intense debates in the history of the church.

This question was debated in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD by Pelagius and Augustine and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Synod of Dort and the Remonstrants.

But it was also debated, in writing, by two very important men during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation. In 1524 the Dutch Renaissance Humanist scholar, Erasmus, wrote a book called *The Freedom of the Will*. The title expresses the theme of his book, that is, we have a free will. A year later the famous German Reformer, Martin Luther, answered Erasmus with book called, *The Bondage of the Will*. In it he thanked Erasmus for going to the heart of the issue; “You have not worried me with extraneous issues about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences and the like – trifles rather than issues – you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns and have aimed for the vital spot.”

This is the vital spot, this is the key question: does man have a free will? Can he freely choose to believe in God? Can he approach God by his own choice?

Jesus answered these questions in this verse by explaining that no one could come to him in faith unless the Father drew him; no one could be saved apart from the sovereign will of God.

We will consider this verse looking at:

1. Our Inability
2. God’s Power
3. Christ’s Promise

### 1. OUR INABILITY - “No one can come to me...”

a. Notice that Jesus does not say, “No one *may* come to me...” nor, “No one is *allowed* to come to me...” Everyone *may* come to Jesus, everyone is *permitted* to come to him, but, on their own, left to themselves, based on their own choice, no one *can* come to him, no one *is able* to do this.

This is the clear and consistent teaching of the Bible. No one can come to God without God’s sovereign and gracious help. No one can choose for God without the powerful and irresistible work of God’s Spirit.

b. We are in this situation because we are dead in our transgressions and sins. A dead person cannot hear God’s call, cannot believe in Jesus, cannot respond to God, cannot get up and move closer to him. He is dead.

Say the engine of your car runs out of oil and the engine seizes. It is wrecked, it will not turn over, and it cannot fix itself, it cannot repair itself. It needs outside help; it needs a mechanic.

In the same way we are wrecked, we are broken inside, and we can’t fix it, we can’t repair it.

In theology we describe this condition as “original sin”. This is the corruption of our whole nature; we have a sinful human nature. We inherited this from Adam after his fall into sin and it has been passed down to us from parents to children.

Left to ourselves we are condemned to eternal death. In John 3:18 Jesus said; “whoever does not believe stands condemned already...” In verse 36 we read; “whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” In John 5:40 Jesus said to the Jews, “you refuse to come to me to have life.” This is our position.

c. Calvinists describe this as **total depravity**.

This does not mean that everyone is as bad as they could be. Not everyone is a murderer, a rapist, an adulterer; not everyone is a Adolf Hitler or a Pol Pot.

Total depravity means that sin has affected the totality of our human person. You and I are sinful through and through. Every part of us has been affected – our heart, mind, emotions, body, *and will*.

Not all Christians agree with this description. Many admit, “Yes, we are in a bad way, and we have a sinful heart; but there is one part of us that is still okay and that is our will. We have a free will and we can choose for God and for his salvation.” But that is not what Jesus says here. He said, “No one can come to me.” By ourselves we cannot choose for God.

d. So, not only are we totally depraved but we are also **totally unable** to help ourselves. Our will is locked in sin.

Adam, in the Garden of Eden, before the fall, had a completely free will. He was able to choose between good and evil. He chose for the evil. Since then our wills have been slaves to sin.

It is true that we have a free will in a *general or natural* sense. God has created us with the ability to make choices. You can choose to be a bricklayer or an electrician, a nurse or a teacher. You can choose to go to university in Christchurch or in Auckland. You can choose whether to go on holiday or to stay home and, if you go away, where you will go. You can choose whether to get up in the morning or to stay in bed, whether to wear your blue shirt or your brown one; whether to have corn flakes for breakfast or bacon and eggs. You can choose to be faithful or unfaithful in marriage, to declare all your income or to hide it, to love your kids or beat them up. These are all free choices, decisions you can make each day, each week.

But no one has a free will in a *religious or a moral* sense. Left to ourselves no one can or will choose to believe in God or to follow the Lord Jesus. By nature we are sinners; we are rebels against God. No one will go to God by himself; no one will choose to be saved out of her own will. “No one can come to me.”

**2. GOD’S POWER.** Jesus said, “No one can come to me *unless the Father who sent me draws him.*”

a. The word that connects these two clauses is the word “**unless**”.

This is a key word in a children’s book written by Dr Seuss called *The Lorax*. In it the Once-ler found a forest of Truffala trees and, despite the protests of the Lorax, he chopped them all down. When the last one was cut down the Lorax left, leaving behind a small pile of rocks with the words, UNLESS. Nothing was going to change *unless* someone came in to plant new trees and look after them. *The Lorax* presents a message of ecological salvation – save the trees!

We too are concerned about the trees and ecology, but we are far more concerned about our *eternal* salvation.

The Bible teaches us that nothing will change in the lives of sinful men and women unless God plants new life in our hearts by his Holy Spirit. Nothing will change in us unless God draws us to himself!

We cannot help ourselves but God can help us, and he has. He chooses a people for himself, he takes the initiative, he makes the first move, he draws us to his Son.

b. God **draws** us.

The word for draw does not mean to influence, or to attract, or to invite, or to advise.

It is much stronger than that. It is used of the disciples drawing a net full of fish onto the beach (John 21:6). It is used of Peter drawing his sword (John 18:10). It is used of Paul and Silas being dragged before the authorities (Acts 16:19). In each case it refers to a powerful and irresistible force.

It is the same when God draws us to his Son. In the doctrines of grace summarized by the Synod of Dort they described this as God's "Irresistible Grace". God powerfully draws us to himself.

CS Lewis described his conversion in his book, "Surprised by Joy". He was a lecturer in English literature in Oxford. He wrote; "You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet... The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and his compulsion is our liberation." (End of chp14)

c. As God draws us by his power he works **with our wills**.

CS Lewis wrote about being brought in kicking and struggling, "perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

But as he looked back he could see that God had been working in him by his Spirit, through other people, and through his reading, to bring about a change of mind and heart and will.

He wrote; "And so the great Angler played his fish and I never dreamed that the hook was in my tongue... All the books were beginning to turn against me... All over the board my pieces were in the most disadvantageous positions. Soon I could no longer cherish the illusion that the initiative lay with me. My Adversary began to make his final moves." (p. 169-173).

Now, God does not treat us like fish and drag us unwillingly to Jesus. He does not approach us as stones or senseless blocks of wood. No, he treats us as thinking, responsible beings.

He enlightens our minds and softens our wills. He works with us and in us so that we desire to know God, so that we seek him, so that we come to him willingly and gladly (cf. Canons of Dort, III/IV Art 16).

d. God draws us **through the Scriptures**.

Jesus described that in verse 45 when he quoted what was "written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God'." We are taught by God through his Word, through the Bible. "Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the Word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).

e. God draws us **to his Son**.

Jesus said, "No one can come to *me*..." Later Jesus told his disciples; "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The only way to know God the Father is to believe in God the Son.

f. That God draws us does not mean that you and I can just sit back and wait for this to happen. The Bible not only stresses God's sovereign power in the work of salvation, but it also emphasizes **your responsibility**.

God commands and urges you to repent of your sin, to come to him, to believe in Jesus, to accept the gift of eternal life, to eat the bread of life, to knock on the door, to ask for forgiveness. This is what you must do: believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved (Acts 16:31).

We have considered our inability: "No one can come to me."

We have considered God's power: "...unless the Father who sent me draws him."

3. Finally, we consider **CHRIST'S PROMISE**

"...and I will raise him up at the last day."

We have seen that the salvation of believers is God's work - that is how it begins, that is how it continues and that is how it will end. The triune God is at work from beginning to end. God predestines us, calls us, justifies us, sanctifies us and one day he will glorify us (Rom 8:30). "... he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).

This is what Jesus is pointing to when he said, "And I will raise him up at the last day." The apostle Paul wrote, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess 4:16).

All those who have been chosen by God, and drawn by him, and have come to Christ will be raised on that last day. These mortal bodies of ours will be raised immortal; what died weak will be raised in power; what went down into the grave will be taken up to be with God in heaven.

We will be raised by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ; "I will raise him up at the last day." Salvation is all God's work, from beginning to end.

So, does man have a free will?

Yes he does in all the general choices of life, but not when it comes to choosing any spiritual good that will result in salvation.

"No one can come to the Father unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."

All this is ultimately for God's glory. We are God's workmanship "...in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:7).

All that God has done, is doing, and will do in us is for his glory and praise. This is why the Scriptures emphasize that salvation is his work and not ours, so that the glory may go to him, not to us.

Amen.