

Whose Doing Is It? God's or Man's

Whose Doing Is It – Part 2

August 22, 2010

I. Preparatory Information

- A. **Romans 11:33-36** . . . Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! [34] For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? [35] Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? [36] For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

B. Prayer

II. Whose Doing Is It? God's or Man's

- A. The focus of this study – to answer the question, “Whose doing is it, God's or man's?”
- B. Most of the following arrangement of the scriptures comes from John Cassian's Thirteenth Conference. It was spoken by Chaeremon, who was over one hundred years old at the time he spoke it to Cassian. The scriptures that he quoted were quoted from memory, for at that time it was the goal of the devout Christian to memorize the entire Bible. I have edited this conference and in places, paraphrased what Cassian wrote. The scriptures that I will quote come from the NASB, 1995 revision.

God's grace, that is, His salvation, empowerment, and protection – passed on to us through Jesus Christ our Lord – is at hand and available to us every day! It calls out to everyone, without exception, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Those who perish by dying in their sin or who lack God's empowerment for holy living, do so against His will.

We see this clearly in relation to perishing, for God said, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezekiel 33:11a). And Christ himself said, “How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling” (Matthew 23:37b).

Regarding empowerment for holy living, we see – in the words of the Apostle Paul – that God’s grace is always present and available to us when he says, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13), and again when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20).

This divine action – be it wooing us, convicting us, empowering us for holy living, assisting us in doing good, or putting a talking donkey in the way to turn us aside from our own foolishness – is driven by God’s love for us, and is always present for us. So great is this love of the Creator for His creature that His protective care not only stands alongside us, it goes constantly before us. The prophet, who experienced this, states it very clearly when he says: “The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night” (Exodus 13:21).

And again, when God notices a desire for Him or for godliness springing up in us, at once He enlightens and encourages it and spurs it on, giving increase to what He himself planted and we nurtured by our own efforts. For, He says, “It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24). And again: “He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. When He hears it, He will answer you” (Isaiah 30:19).

Not only does God graciously inspire holy desires, He also arranges favorable moments in our life which hold the possibility of godly results – if we respond according to His will. And He shows the path of life to us when we are straying. The reality is, our human reason does not easily comprehend what appears to some as two opposing truths about the interaction between God and man – that is, how He gives to those who ask, is found by those who seek, and opens to those who knock (Matthew 7:7); and on the other hand, how He is found by those who do not seek, appears openly among these who were not asking for Him, stretches out His hands the whole day to a people who do not believe in Him and who stubbornly persist in their unbelief (Romans 10:20-21), calls those who resist and are far away, draws the unwilling to salvation, removes from those who want to sin the means of fulfilling their desire, and graciously hinders those who are hastening on to what is evil.

Returning to God’s doing and our doing in relation to salvation, who understands clearly how the choice to be saved is attributed to our will, about which it is said:

“If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land” (Isaiah 1:19). And again God says, “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:22). And Jesus added, “Whoever believes in the Son will have eternal life” (John 3:15). Yet at the same time it says: “It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Romans 9:16). However, that very same Apostle tells us that God “renders to each person according to his deeds” (Romans 2:6). And yet he also wrote: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

It is almost impossible to misinterpret the meaning of these words: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). And yet Jesus said elsewhere: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44).

Consider this: “Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established” (Proverbs 4:26). And yet when we pray, do we not cry out and say: “O Lord, lead me in Your righteousness . . . and make Your way straight before me” (Psalms 5:8)? And again: “Lead me in paths of righteousness for Your name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3)?

Are we not admonished by God to: “Cast away all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 18:31)? And yet this same God said: “I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them” (Ezekiel 11:18-20).

What does the Lord command when He says: “Wash your heart from evil, O Jerusalem, that you may be saved” (Jeremiah 4:14a)? And again: “Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord” (Hosea 10:12)? Yet what does the psalmist ask of the Lord when he says: “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psalm 51:10)? And again when he prays: “Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Psalms 51:7)?

We see that in all these scriptures, both the grace of God and our freedom of will are affirmed. We see that a person, by his own efforts and activity, can nurture and act on a sincere desire for salvation and holiness, but he always needs to be helped by the Lord. For no one enjoys good health just because he eats and lives in healthy ways, nor is he freed from sickness at the command of his will. Therefore, the Lord’s brother says: “Is anyone among you sick? Then he must

call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up” (James 5:14-15).

But to make it still more evident that out of a good nature – which has been bestowed on us by the kindness of our Creator – the beginnings of a good will [that is, godly desires] sometimes spring up, here is the witness of the Apostle, who says: “The will [to do good] is present in me, but the doing of the good [that is, carrying it out to its intended end] is not” (Romans 7:18b). And so we see from the words of Paul both the will to do good and the fact that we cannot attain to the perfection of holiness unless we are guided and assisted by the Lord.

Without question, the divine Scriptures verify the freedom of our will when it says: “Watch over your heart with all diligence” (Proverbs 4:23). But the Apostle lays bare the weakness of our will when he says: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). David proclaims the power of free will when he says: “I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes forever, even to the end” (Psalms 119:112). But he also teaches its weakness when he prays and says: “Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to dishonest gain” (Psalms 119:36). Solomon concurs with the weakness of our will when he says: “May the Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers; may He not leave us or forsake us, that He may incline our hearts to Himself, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances, which He commanded our fathers” (I Kings 8:57-58).

The psalmist refers to the power of our will when he says: “Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit” (Psalm 34:13). Our own prayer testifies to its weakness when we pray: “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3). The ability of our will is declared by the Lord when it is said: “Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose yourself from the chains around your neck, O captive daughter of Zion” (Isaiah 52:2). The prophet declares the frailty of our will when he says: “The Lord sets the prisoners free” (Psalm 146:7). And again we read: “You have loosed my bonds. To You I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving” (Psalm 116:16-17).

We hear the Lord calling us in the Gospel to come to him by our free will, when he says: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). But the same Lord testifies to its weakness when he says: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44).

The Apostle refers to our free will when he says: “Run in such a way that you may win” (I Corinthians 9:24). But John the Baptist bears witness to its weakness when he says: “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven” (John 3:27). The Apostle writes to the Philippians and refers to their free will when he says: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). But in order to show its weakness he adds: “It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

These truths are mixed together and fused so indistinguishably, that which is dependent on which is a great question as far as many people are concerned. Does God show mercy to us because we manifest the beginnings of a good will, or do we acquire the beginnings of a good will because God shows mercy? Or, as I have stated from the beginning of this series: “Whose doing is it? God’s or man’s?

Many who hold to one of these alternatives as having more weight than the other have fallen into different self-contradictory errors. For if we said that the beginning of free will was up to us, what goodwill was there in Paul the persecutor and in Matthew the tax-collector? Paul was drawn to salvation while intent upon the blood and torment of Christians (Acts 9:1-6), and Matthew while intent upon the plunder of personal property (Matthew 9:9). But if we said that the beginnings of a good will were always inspired by the grace of God, what should we say about the faith of Zaccheus (Luke 19:2-10) and about the devotion of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:40-43)? By their own desire they forced their way into the heavenly kingdom (Matthew 11:12). Yet if we attribute the perfection of holy living and the carrying out of the commandments of God to our will alone, what do we say about Balaam, who was brought to curse Israel but was not permitted to curse when he wanted to (Numbers 22:5-24:25)? And in like manner we see that Abimelech was prevented from touching Rebekah and sinning against God (Genesis 20:6).

Joseph was sold into slavery because of his brothers’ envy. Yet God wanted an offspring of the children of Israel in Egypt and provisions for future famine made ready for those who plotted their brother’s death. This same Joseph made this plain when he revealed himself to his brothers and said: “Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Genesis 45:5). And then he said: “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (Genesis 45:7-8).

And when his brothers were frightened, after the death of their father, that Joseph might avenge himself on them, he removed their anxious fear by saying: “Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Genesis 50:19-20). The blessed David affirms in the hundred and fifth psalm that God had acted providentially when he says: “And [God] called for a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread. He sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave” (Psalms 105:16-17).

Therefore, though these two things – the gracious empowerment and assistance of God on the one hand and the free will of man on the other – seem mutually opposed to one another, they are both in agreement. And since God presents both in His holy scriptures, can we do anything other than accept both as two sides of a single truth?

Indeed, it must not be believed that God made us in such a way that we have no will of our own or that we are incapable of doing any good. Consider this: we cannot claim that God has given us a free will if we say we can only exercise it in willing what is evil. And we cannot claim that we are capable of doing good if we say we are not capable of willing the good or carrying out the good ourselves. If we make such claims we must either ignore or contradict the words of the Lord which He spoke after the sin of Adam: “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:22).

Who of us would say that Adam was completely ignorant of what God said was good before eating the fruit from the tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil? Of course after his sin, Adam gained a knowledge of evil he had not had previously. On the other hand, to assume the knowledge of evil – brought into mankind by Adam’s sin – removed any knowledge of good, not only contradicts our Lord’s words, but also the words of the Apostle who clearly states: “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:14-16).

It is because we are capable of understanding the difference between good and evil that the Lord rebukes the willful blindness of the Jews, which they brought upon themselves by their own stubbornness. “Hear, you deaf! And look, you blind, that you may see. You have seen many things, but you do not observe them; your

ears are open, but none hears" (Isaiah 42:18, 20). And so that no one would be able to attribute their blindness to nature and not to will, God says: "Bring out the people who are blind, even though they have eyes, and the deaf, even though they have ears" (Isaiah 43:8). The Lord also says in the Gospel: "While seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matthew 13:13). Finally, in order to show that the possibility for good lay in them, He said when He rebuked the crowds that were listening to Him: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'A shower is coming,' and so it turns out. And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, 'It will be a hot day,' and it turns out that way. You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time? And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right" (Luke 12:54-57)? Jesus certainly would not have said this to them if he had not known that they could discern what was right by natural judgment.

Therefore, we must be on guard against attributing all the good works of Christians to the Lord in such a way that we ascribe nothing but what is bad and perverse to human nature. Those who hold such a view are refuted by the testimony of the most wise Solomon, or rather by that of the Lord, whose words Solomon spoke. For when the building of the Temple was finished, Solomon prayed and said: "Now it was in the heart of my father David to build a house for the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. But the Lord said to my father David, 'Because it was in your heart to build a house for My name, you did well that it was in your heart. Nevertheless you shall not build the house, but your son who will be born to you, he will build the house for My name'" (I Kings 8:17-19). So here is the question: Was this desire in David's heart good and from God, or bad and from man? If this heart-felt desire was good and was from God, why was its being brought to fulfillment denied by the very One who inspired it? Or if it was bad and was from man, why was it praised by the Lord? Our conclusion, then, is that we should believe it was both good and from man.

However, I need to make something very clear here. There is no room for human pride in acknowledging man's part. David isn't the first and you will not be the last to have good desires toward God. In fact, it is God in His kindness who has placed in every one of us the seeds of goodness. And unless they have been germinated by the help of God they will not be able to increase to godliness. The blessed Apostle makes this clear when he says, "So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth" (I Corinthians 3:7).

Therefore, there always remains in the human being a free will that can either neglect or love the grace of God. For the Apostle would not have commanded and said: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), if he had not known that such things could either be pursued or neglected by us. But to prevent us from thinking we can do this all on our own – that we do not need God’s help in working out our salvation – he adds: “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). We see this same single, yet seemingly two sided truth, when the Apostle urges the Christians in Corinth not to waste the grace of God in regard to their salvation. To them he said: “And working together with Him [God], we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain, for He [God] says, ‘At the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you’” (II Corinthians 6:1-2).

It is God who calls and invites us when He says: “All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people” (Romans 10:21). And yet we invite Him when we say: “I stretch out my hands to You; my soul longs for You, as a parched land [longs for water]” (Psalms 143:6; Psalm 88:9).

He waits for us, as so stated by the prophet: “Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you” (Isaiah 30:18). And we wait for Him when we say: “I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me and heard my cry” (Psalms 40:1). And the day will come when we will say: “Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation” (Isaiah 25:9).

We know He strengthens us, for He says: “Although I trained and strengthened their arms, yet they devise evil against Me” (Hosea 7:15). And He exhorts us to strengthen ourselves when He says: “Strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble” (Hebrews 12:12).

Jesus cries out for us to come to him when he says: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink” (John 7:37). The prophet also cries out, asking God to come to him when he says: “I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched; my eyes fail while I wait for my God” (Psalms 69:2-3).

And so we see that our sovereign and gracious God always works together with our will in the pursuit of what is right and good – helping our will, and even protecting it when it is too weak to defend itself (I Corinthians 10:13). Yet even

in protecting our will from certain attacks of the enemy, God does not free us from His demands and expectations regarding purity of heart and holiness of life. And though He does not overcome the foolish inclinations of the spiritually lazy, He confers His grace with immeasurable generosity on any meager and small effort that comes from a sincere heart.

III. Conclusion