

# UNLESS THE FATHER DRAWS HIM

John 6:41-47

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, July 27, 2008

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“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:44).

**I**t is remarkable how much Jesus’ encounter with the hungry crowd in John 6 resembles Moses’ experience with Israel in the desert. Then, the Israelites grumbled when God gave them manna from heaven. Likewise, the Jews who were fed by Jesus grumbled against him. In both cases, the people cared only for earthly satisfaction. The Israelites responded to the manna by demanding of Moses, “Give us meat” (Nu. 11:13). The people in Jesus’ day demanded, “Give us this bread always” (Jn. 6:34). The Israelites’ dissatisfaction with Moses led to a rebellion; the crowd of John 6 rejected Jesus and, ultimately, their leaders handed him over to be killed.

The way the Israelites reacted to Moses and the Jews reacted to Jesus is how people react to God’s Word today. These episodes reveal not a Jewish problem but a human problem when it comes to the Word of God. It is especially the Bible’s doctrines of grace, which Jesus emphasized in this chapter, that stir up carnal opposition. James Boice writes, “It is one of the surest facts of Christianity that when the doctrines of man’s total spiritual depravity and the necessity for God’s electing grace in salvation are preached there will be resentment by many who hear them.”<sup>1</sup>

We need to realize this as we minister the gospel today. And, being sinners ourselves, we need to recognize the tendencies of our own

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<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:511.

sin-ful natures so that we might be careful to believe the Bible's teaching.

### ISN'T THIS JOSEPH'S BOY?

When Jesus first called on the crowd to believe in him, they evaded by asking for yet another sign (Jn. 6:30-31), showing that an unbelieving heart never has enough reasons to believe. Jesus replied that their unbelief would not thwart his mission, since "all that the Father gives me will come to me" (Jn. 6:37). This led to another appeal for them to believe on him as the Savior from heaven.

This produced only another tactic of unbelief: unable to refute the message, they focused on the messenger. This happens often today, as people put off a Christian witness by arguing the failings of Christians they know. Certainly, Christians are to present a living witness that commends the gospel we preach. But the imperfections of believers are hardly a reason to reject God's revealed truth.

In Jesus' case, the problem was not his conduct or character, both of which were perfect. The problem was what the people knew – or thought they knew – about his origins. "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" (Jn. 6:42). These were Galileans, and Jesus' birth had taken place in Bethlehem of Judea. It seems that the virgin birth had remained a secret, so that the people assumed that Joseph was Jesus' natural, rather than adopted, father.

The people were sure that Jesus' statement to have "come down from heaven" could not have been true. How sure they were – and how wrong! The problem with human reasoning is that it is often misinformed. How often our thinking proceeds from false assumptions that we fail to question. People today say, "The Bible just contains what certain people experienced or thought." In today's post-modern culture, it is popular for skeptics to argue, "The Bible only says what the Church wants you to believe." Such reasoning keeps people from seriously considering the Bible, but were they sincerely to consider God's Word they would find that their reasoning is in error. George Hutcheson writes, "Men need to subject their

reasonings to divine revelation in the things of God, lest they wrong him and themselves both.”<sup>2</sup>

The humanity of Christ is a doctrine that especially offends human reason. “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” they asked. This shows that they understood that Jesus was claiming a divine origin: “How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” It is always hard to admire someone you knew growing up, which is why Jesus said, “A prophet has no honor in his own hometown” (Jn. 4:44). But to think that a humble carpenter’s son might be the eternal, divine Son is beyond reason. Yet the humanity of Christ is one of the great glories of the gospel; that God’s eternally existing Son would take up flesh to live and die for us is, John Calvin says, “the shining example of His boundless love toward us and of His wonderful grace.”<sup>3</sup>

The English poet Thomas Hardy was entertaining his friend T. E. Lawrence, the celebrated “Lawrence of Arabia.” Instead of exploiting his fame, Lawrence had enlisted in the Royal Air Force to lead a life of humble service. During his visit, the Mayoress of Dorchester arrived. Offended by the presence of an apparent commoner, the Mayoress whispered in French to Mrs. Hardy that never in all her life had she had to sit to tea with a mere private soldier. No one replied, until Lawrence said in perfect French: “I beg your pardon, Madame, but can I be of any use as an interpreter? Mrs. Hardy knows no French.”<sup>4</sup> What a shock for the Mayoress of Dorchester! How much greater will be the shock of those who despise the manhood of Christ when he is revealed at the end of the age in all his heavenly glory!

Jesus’ response to the murmuring is telling: “Go not grumble among yourselves.” Some Christians need that rebuke, as they grumble about one thing or another in the church. But the need is greater among unbelievers. Trading in human reasons not to believe can only lead to death; instead of subjecting the Bible to the folly of our murmuring, we must submit our reasoning to the revealed Word of God.

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<sup>2</sup> George Hutcheson, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 119.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:163.

<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:219.

## THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

Jesus responded with a spiritual assessment of these grumbling people. What can account for their obstinate unbelief? He explained, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Jn. 6:44). Persistent unbelief results from man’s spiritual inability. He says that man in his sinful condition not only *does* not or *will* not come to him, but *cannot* come to him.

This points to a matter in which the Bible sharply conflicts with worldly thinking. If human reason murmurs against Jesus’ incarnation, it rails against his denial of free will. Even Christians are divided on this issue, despite our Lord’s plain teaching. Some of the sharpest controversies in church history have centered on the supposed freedom of the human will, including Augustine’s battle with the heretic Pelagius and that between Calvinists and Arminians.

A classic confrontation was between Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther at the dawn of the Reformation. Erasmus was the great scholar who’s Greek New Testament was so helpful to the Reformers. But Erasmus was too much of a humanist, and over the question of free will he and Luther crossed pens. Erasmus defended free will partly by appealing to John 6:44. He said that God draws people in the same way that a donkey’s owner holds carrots under its nose to get it to move. He argued that “though sin has weakened man, it has not made him utterly incapable of meritorious action... There is, he affirms, a power in the human will... ‘by which man may apply himself to those things that lead to salvation.’”<sup>5</sup>

Luther replied with perhaps the greatest of his books, *The Bondage of the Will*. He did not deny that man has a will or that man makes choices. What he denied is that sinful man does so “freely”. For Luther, this was an essential question: “whether sinners are wholly helpless in their sin, and whether God is to be thought of as saving them by free, unconditional invincible grace... whether, in the last analysis Christianity is a religion of utter reliance on God for

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<sup>5</sup> J.I. Packer, “Historical and Theological Introduction” to Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1957), 48.

salvation and all things necessary to it, or of self-reliance and self-effort.”<sup>6</sup>

Erasmus understood the “drawing” of which Jesus spoke to consist of simple outward persuasion: sufficiently enticing carrots to win over men’s free will. But Luther replied that in John 6 Jesus employed the most potent persuasions and got nowhere with his Jewish hearers. “The ungodly does not ‘come,’” he wrote, “even when he hears the word, unless the Father draws and teaches him inwardly; which He does by shedding abroad His Spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly, the majority of evangelical Christians today insist on human free will. To argue otherwise, they think, is to look on people as mere puppets who make no choices at all. They often insist that God cannot or at least would not violate our “free will.” This inevitably shapes their approach to evangelism, and accounts for the way persuasions of almost any kind are used to induce unbelievers to “decide” for Christ.

How do we respond to the defense of “free will?” Like Luther, we agree that men and women make genuine choices. What we deny is that their choices are free from the overwhelmingly controlling influence of sin. As Jesus plainly states, man in sin is not free to come to Christ. A. W. Pink explains:

To talk about exerting the will is to ignore the state of the man behind the will. Man’s will has not escaped the general wreckage of his nature. When man fell, *every* part of his being was affected. Just as truly as the sinner’s heart is estranged from God and his understanding darkened, so is his will enslaved by sin... To predicate the freedom of the will is to *deny* that man is totally depraved. To say that man *has* the power within himself to either reject or accept Christ, is to *repudiate* the fact that he is the captive of the Devil.<sup>8</sup>

The Bible says that man is not merely sick and weak, but “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Spiritually speaking, unbelievers are no more able to come to Christ than a dead man is able to rise and walk. Paul says, “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7-8). Jesus insisted,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1957), 311.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 337-338.

“Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (Jn. 8:34). Luther therefore argued, “Free will, after the fall, exists in name only... For the will is captive and subject to sin... Hence Augustine said... ‘Free will without grace has the power to do nothing but sin’, and... ‘You call the will free, but in fact it is an enslaved will.’”<sup>9</sup>

Returning to John 6:44, it is helpful to study the meaning of the word “drawn” (Greek, *helkuso*). The same word is used in John 21 for hauling or dragging a net full of fish onto the shore. In Acts 16:19, it is used when Paul and Silas are “dragged” before the civil authorities. Again, it is used in John 18:10 when Peter “drew” his sword from its scabbard. In each case, there is the idea of resistance that is overcome by superior force. By nature, man in sin is resistant to God and, unless overcome by God’s inward working, he cannot and will not come to Christ.

All this means that conversion to Christ is a supernatural work that relies on God’s power alone. “No one can come to me,” Jesus said, “unless the Father... draws him” (Jn. 6:44). And it is because salvation depends utterly on the inward working of God’s sovereign grace that we know that the glory for our salvation goes to God alone. When Elijah wanted to show who is the true God, he doused the wood of his offering in water, until “the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water” (1 Ki. 18:35). His point was to make the offering as unsuitable as possible for lighting. Then, when the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the offering, licking up even the water in the trench, all the people fell before him and cried, “The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God” (1 Ki. 18:38-39). In the same way, God gathers glory to himself by drawing people doused and drowned in sin to faith in his Son, Jesus Christ.

## DRAWN BY THE FATHER

**W**hat, then, does it mean to be “drawn” to Christ by God? Does God violate the will, dragging sinners to the Savior by outward force? Is conversion like a man who is arrested in his home, placed into handcuffs, and dragged into the police car? The Bible contains no examples of conversion that look like this.

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther: *Heidelberg Disputations* (Basic Writings), pp. 39-40.

Instead, the Bible shows that God draws men and women to Christ by graciously changing their hearts, setting them free from their bondage in sin. Acts 16:14 describes the conversion of Lydia by saying, “The Lord opened her heart.” This is what God does in conversions: he opens hearts. Ezekiel prophesied, “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Eze. 36:26).

Theologians associate conversion with the “effectual call” of Christ. A good example is the conversion of Matthew. He was “sitting at the tax booth” in Capernaum, when Jesus came up and called, “Follow me.” Matthew must have heard Jesus’ gospel many times, since he was situated at a crossroads in Jesus’ base of ministry. This is the general call that goes out to all who hear, just as Jesus sent his gospel call generally to the crowd of John 6. But when Jesus called directly and personally to Matthew with the effectual call, “he rose and followed him” (Mt. 9:9). Matthew then came willingly and, no doubt, joyfully, his heart changed by the power of God. Pink says the effectual calling or drawing of God

is the power of the Holy Spirit overcoming the self-righteousness of the sinner, and convicting him of his lost condition. It is the Holy Spirit awakening within him a sense of need. It is the power of the Holy Spirit overcoming the pride of the natural man, so that he is ready to come to Christ as an empty-handed beggar. It is the Holy Spirit creating within him an hunger for the bread of life.<sup>10</sup>

In John 6:45, Jesus elaborates, “It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’” This seems to be a quote from Isaiah 54:13, where God promised to give his children “the true knowledge of salvation that they so directly lack.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus may also have been referring to the great promise of the new covenant made in Jeremiah 31:33-34: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts... And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me.” To be taught by God is to have the truth of his Word impressed upon your mind and heart. When Peter made his great confession of faith in Christ, Jesus exclaimed, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For

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<sup>10</sup> Pink, 338-339.

<sup>11</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 233.

flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 16:17).

It is clear from this that the effectual call, and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, precedes and produces faith. He says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life” (Jn. 6:47). Jesus speaks in the present tense to show that whoever believes already has eternal life. We believe as we are born again through the Word; just as a new baby responds to his birth by crying, the one drawn by God expresses his new life by professing faith in Jesus.

Moreover, those who are drawn by God always come to Christ. Jesus adds, “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me – not that anyone has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father” (Jn. 6:45-46). The only way to know God is through his Son who reveals him. And the way to know that you have been savingly called by God is to come to his Son.

This is an emphasis that Christians greatly need to recover. I recently saw an article in *Christianity Today* magazine, touting a “cutting-edge” scholar who offers a “fresh” theological perspective. Amos Yong teaches we should discern God’s grace in non-Christian faiths. He speaks of “the universal work of the Spirit... outside Christianity’s borders,” and insists that “the Spirit of God cannot be imprisoned within Christian walls.”<sup>12</sup> But, in direct contrast, Jesus says, “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (Jn. 6:45). John Calvin notes, “From this it follows that none of God’s elect shall be outside the faith of Christ... [since] the only wisdom that all the elect learn in the school of God is to come to Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him,” Jesus says, “and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:44). What confidence this gives us for salvation if we have come to Christ in faith. Luther spoke boldly but profoundly when he wrote:

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want ‘free-will’ to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavour after salvation; not merely because in face of so many

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<sup>12</sup> Roger E. Olsen, “A Wind that Swirls Everywhere,” *ChristianityToday.com*, posted 3/29/2006.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, I65.

dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my 'free-will' (for one devil is stronger than all men)... But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him.<sup>14</sup>

## HOPE IN THE LORD

**I**n applying this passage, let us first consider the implications for our ministry. If no one can come to Christ unless drawn by the Father, then we should commit to those means of grace given and approved by God. We are living in a day of many false conversions, precisely because people have been persuaded to call themselves Christians without having understood the gospel. I realize it is possible to move the carnal will by means of carnal persuasions. But since salvation depends on God, we must employ methods that are commanded by him, especially the preaching and witness of the gospel.

This means that our witness must focus on the Word of God. I mentioned God's promise in Ezekiel 36 to give new hearts to his people. The next chapter dramatizes how this happens. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet comes to a valley of dry bones – human corpses devoid even of flesh – a most vivid picture of man's spiritually dead condition. The prophet was appalled, but God commanded him, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord" (Eze. 37:3-4). So Ezekiel began preaching. The bones began to move, and flesh came upon them as God's Word was preached, and then "the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet" (Eze. 37:10). What a vision of the power of God's Word! Peter said, "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). If we are to be used by God to bring spiritual life to others, it will be through the witness and teaching of God's Word.

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<sup>14</sup> Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 313-314

Second, Jesus' teaching induces us to a greater commitment to evangelistic prayer. If only God can open the heart of our child, parent, spouse, or friend, then let us appeal to God. The general call of the gospel, without God's effectual drawing, saves no one, even when Jesus himself is the one preaching. Likewise, our witness can have no effect without God drawing people through it, making the general call effectual by the sending of his Holy Spirit. Therefore, let us pray to God for his power to bring new life to those who hear his Word.

Third, while we may face the kind of frustration that Jesus felt with this Jewish crowd, we must not despair. For when he said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," Jesus knew that the Father draws many, including the least likely of converts. Just as the lack of food did not keep Jesus from feeding the five thousand, human limitations today do not hinder the sovereign working of God in salvation. Let us look at no one and say, "He cannot be saved." Instead, let us keep preaching God's Word, pointing to Christ, living in a way that commends our witness, and let us keep praying, never giving up on anyone.

And do not give up on yourself, if you have not yet come to Christ. None of the things keeping you back from Christ can stand against God's mighty grace, if he is drawing you. If God is speaking to your heart, come to Jesus Christ. Then rejoice, for Jesus says, "Whoever believes has eternal life" (Jn. 6:47). Then you will be free from the bondage of sin over your mind, heart, and will. For as Jesus taught, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36).