

While I was struggling with issues relating to Calvinism, I often repeated an assertion that I had picked up from my Dispensational brethren which was essentially this: God's giving of a command to fallen man necessarily implies that man has the ability to respond to the command. In other words, responsibility necessitates ability. For God to demand something that His creatures were innately incapable of responding to would not have sat well with the non-confessional, non-denominational Dispensational church I was brought up in, and it did not sit well with me.

Not having a sufficiently coherent theological framework in place, such an assertion regarding man's ability to repent seemed reasonable, especially when the "prevenient grace" of God would necessarily be bestowed upon all. It was not that man in his natural state could keep the commandments, but that God had enabled all men to do what He commands by extending His grace to all people. And all you had to do to make this case was show from the Scriptures that "God...commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30), remind objectors that only some men actually do repent, and chalk up the difference to man's inviolable and autonomous will which sometimes stubbornly resists the grace of God.

It wasn't until years later (and my dogmatism on this point had been already eroded by a variety of authors and pastors, including my own) that I heard a lecture by the late John W. Robbins which cut right through my objection and exposed the logical fallacy in my reasoning. It was his first lecture in a series titled, "**An Introduction to Logic**". Ironically, while I was criticizing the Calvinists for being illogical on this point, I learned from Robbins that *I* was the one who was being illogical. Without realizing it, many of us may be regurgitating the arguments Erasmus hurled at Luther, despite the fact that the Reformer had obliterated the objections of the Romanist almost 500 years ago.

In 2010, during a sermon series addressing the five-points of Calvinism, Pastor Ed Moore contended that it was incorrect to assume that responsibility implies ability. But at that time I had my own illustrations sufficient to keep me under the delusion that he was wrong in this bold assertion. As it turns out his argument was logical and biblical and I had totally missed it.

Below I have transcribed the segment of Robbins' lecture that struck me and showed where my logical blunder was. Following the transcription I have included a relevant excerpt from Luther's *Bondage of the Will*. Links to both of these resources are also provided.

Hopefully this will be useful to anyone struggling with the issue of responsibility and ability:

*“In [The Bondage of the Will, Luther] deals with many of the logical blunders that people make in interpreting and understanding Scripture. One of the things he deals with is this (and this will become clearer as we go on): **...You cannot draw an inference from a command. You can draw an inference only from a proposition. You cannot draw an inference from a sentence in the imperative mood.** [...] The imperative mood is something like the Ten Commandments, ‘thou shalt not do something’. It’s a command. A declarative mood sentence is something else. It’s a statement about something. David was king of Israel; it’s not a command. It’s simply a sentence in the declarative mood.*

“...One of Luther’s arguments in Bondage of the Will is that people are drawing inferences from commands. They think, for example, that because God tells them to be perfect, they can be perfect. And Luther says this is an elementary blunder, a blunder worthy of schoolchildren. He says it’s a logical mistake. He says, ‘God tells you to be perfect to show you that you can’t do it.’ And that’s why you need a Savior. If you can do it in your own power, there’s no point in having Christ die on the cross. But many people in that day, and in our day think that because there’s a command in Scripture, that implies we can do it. And Luther gives a little lesson in logic, right there in the Bondage of the Will about drawing inferences from commands rather than from declarative sentences.”

Robbins, J., “Introduction to logic” (lecture 1 of 18) in ‘Collection 11 Introduction to Logic’ 23:15-25-15.

Martin Luther:

“And this is the place, where I take occasion to enforce this my general reply: — that man, by the words of the law, is admonished and taught what he ought to do, not what he can do: that is, that he is brought to know his sin, but not to believe that he has any strength in himself. Wherefore, friend Erasmus, as often as you throw in my teeth the Words of the law, so often I throw in yours that of Paul, “By the law is the knowledge of sin,” — not of the power of the will. Heap together, therefore, out of the large Concordances all the imperative words into one chaos, provided that, they be not words of the promise but of the requirement of the law only, and I will immediately declare, that by them is always shewn what men ought to do, not what they can do, or do do. And even common grammarians and every

little school-boy in the street knows, that by verbs of the imperative mood, nothing else is signified than that which ought to be done, and that, what is done or can be done, is expressed by verbs of the indicative mood.

“Thus, therefore, it comes to pass, that you theologians, are so senseless and so many degrees below even school-boys, that when you have caught hold of one imperative verb you infer an indicative sense, as though what was commanded were immediately and even necessarily done, or possible to be done. But how many slips are there between the cup and the lip! So that, what you command to be done, and is therefore quite possible to be done, is yet never done at all. Such a difference is there, between verbs imperative and verbs indicative, even in the most common and easy things. Whereas you, in these things which are as far above those, as the heavens are above the earth, so quickly make indicatives out of imperatives, that the moment you hear the voice of him commanding, saying, “do,” “keep,” “choose,” you will have, that it is immediately kept, done, chosen, or fulfilled, or, that our powers are able so to do.”

Luther, M., **De Servo Arbitrio “On the Enslaved Will” or The Bondage of Will**, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, pp. 111-12.

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