

The Whole Counsel of God
Study 19

THE HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF SIN

*Then Jesus said to His disciples,
“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself....”
Matthew 16.24*

PART II. MAN AS A SELF-DETERMINING BEING

In this part of our study of the human dimensions of sin, our investigation will take us behind the act of sinning to the sinner. What is it about man that enables him to sin? Why did God place man under the law and set him up to be tempted by Satan? These are no mere speculative questions. The questions point to the created nature of man and the way God set up his relationship with man. As we seek to answer these questions, we will tie the doctrine of sin back to the doctrines of creation and of God.

In the first sin, man showed himself to be a self-determining being. On the surface, this means that man determines his own course of action. We call this self-determining action. But, more is involved. Not only did Eve and then Adam determine what they would do, through the act they determined what they would become and this involved a fundamental change in what they were. The self was determining what the self would be. This is what we mean by a self-determining being. In this part of our study, we will evaluate this aspect of sin.

What do we make of man as a self-determining being? The problem faces us every day. People make choices every day, and their actions complicate our lives and destroy so much. The exercise of evaluating what is done takes us behind the action to the person who is self-determining in his behaviour. Are we to conclude that this self-determining nature of man is an evil? What about the decisions to do good and to obey God's commands? Do not all good human deeds come from the same human capacity to choose and decide on one's actions? Behind our self-determining action lies our created capacity to choose. This brings the matter back to the hand of the creator.

The subject we are raising is commonly discussed in terms of freewill. At the outset, we should put this concept in its place. The scriptures are clear about this: all human actions have their source in the heart (Prov 4.23; Matt 15.18-19). The heart is the inner seat where all actions are formed. The scriptures also pinpoint the role of the will to act. In Rom 7.15-25, the will to act is highlighted (*thelein*, the Greek word for the act of the will). When the lusts of the body contradict the will to do good, it is the will that determines what one is in the inner man and whether or not one personally serves God. In the case of the spiritually dead, Paul says that they carry out the will (*ta thelemata*, the things willed) of the flesh and the mind. Jesus traced the Jews' unbelief to the will when he said to them, "...you are not willing (*thelein*) to come to me..." (Jn 5.40). All reason would move them to come to Jesus, especially since they knew that his miracles were the works of God (Jn 3.2), but the will can defy all reasons.

The word of God pierces to the innermost being and judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart to lay bare all things as God sees them (Heb 4.12-13), and this divine sword exposes the will as playing a decisive role in human action. But, nowhere in scripture do we find the term, freewill. This concept comes from philosophy rather than from revelation. We are pointing this out not to dismiss the idea of freewill altogether but to stand back from the idea. We will not let it define the subject in our biblical study of the nature of the will.

If the idea of freewill is not to set the focus for our study, where should we look? The Holy Spirit who breathed all scripture never sees the truth about anything locked with the creature. He presents the truth

within God's relationships. This insight is of particular importance for our subject. Through the fall of mankind, the created will has become self-will, and this self-will draws attention to the self and the human act of will as the defining centre of the truth about the human being. Sinful self-consciousness is stubborn. Self-will wants to hold the place of being the only centre and wants to direct all energies to draw a perfect circle around the self. If it comes under the pressure of divine revelation, it will insist on being one centre alongside of God to form an ellipsis. In this ellipsis, the human being has parity with God in the matter of will even if in all other areas the human being must back off. At the outset of this study, we are correcting the focus. We must see the truth of human action and the human will in the line of revelation—from God to us.

A. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND WILL

The act of sin accentuates the uniqueness of mankind. Animals cannot sin. They can act in destructive ways and do things that would be judged sinful and criminal in human beings. We might have to destroy an animal for its harmful tendencies, but we do not consider the animal morally or criminally responsible. Animals act according to the norm of their nature and not according to a moral or legal norm that is placed over them. We call the norm of their nature, instinct. Human beings have a nature with its appetites and drives, but if the faculties of their mind are normally developed they are never left to merely act out of appetites and drives. Even when they carry out an impulse, they do it as moral agents. By that we mean that their mind and will transcend the mere appetites and drives so that they carry out the action both under a sense of right and wrong and as an act of their will. Their actions are not simply viewed as helpful or harmful, as in the case of animals, but judged to be right or wrong. No matter how depraved the human mind becomes, the sinner must labour under this rule of judgment (Rom 1.32).

What is it about man that makes him a moral agent? What makes him act in a way that is different from animals? One popular answer is that human beings have freewill. But, the human mind also argues the other point of view. Human actions have causes and so are determined. We will not wrestle with the problem between these two horns. We will take a step back and take another look at the biblical account of the first sin.

1. How the will fits in

In the story of the temptation of Eve (Gen 3.1-6), we see sin making its way through three phases. The process began in the mind (vv 1-5). Reasons for obeying God's command were dispelled, and reasons for disobeying (though with God's command out of mind the act is not seen as an act of disobedience) were established. The next phase is the rise of desire (v 6a). Eve opened her eyes and mind to stimulation, and the force of desire worked from within her. The last step was the act, and this involved decision—the act of the will.

The question we ask now is, "What weight do we give to the final act of the will?" We can look at the narrative as building up to the climax of the decisive act of the will. The tempter put God's word out of mind and then stepped back. The "Bible study" and the mind game had to end so that desire could take over and drive Eve. Desire did its work and all turned on one act: the act of the will. The will thus stood in the decisive position. There is, however, another way of reading the narrative. The will stands last and not first; it does not initiate but follows. The act of the will is brought about (dare we say caused) by reasons (or the serpent's manipulation of her mind) and by the aroused desires. From what end are we to look at the Eve's fall?

There is an error in the kind of reasoning we have outlined. Genesis 3.1-7 points out three aspects of the human heart (or soul) involved in the fall of Eve: the rational faculty (the mind) through which we relate to the divine realm of truth, the faculty of desire and feeling that focuses our attention on ourselves (it's good for me; it's pleasant for me, it's desirable for me), and the faculty of will by which we act. The danger is that in the attempt to analyse human behaviour we dissect the soul. We separate the three faculties and lay them out in a row and then try to decide which one plays the decisive role. Those who want to affirm

freewill isolate the will. Those who want to deny freewill will elevate the work of the devil and the driving desires of the soul as the causes of which the will is only the effect. Neither way is true to scripture.

The Bible leaves the soul whole and does not engage in dissection. A little calm reflection will recognize the wisdom in this. Eve's will was engaged in the rational process from the start. She had no thoughts that she did not chose to engage in. In the same way, the desires were roused within her as a result of an act of her will. Before the desires and feelings were aroused, she looked to be stimulated and all along she went along with the stimulation. So, in a real sense the will was engaged in the whole process, from beginning to end. But, the will always had a cause behind it. The serpent spoke and engaged her will, and the reasoning and desires moved her will. Without the will there would be no reasoning or desires. Without the reasoning and desires, there would be no will.

To dissect the soul is to kill it, with the result that one only has three abstractions: intellect, desire and will. But, these abstractions only exist in words. In a living soul where there is real thinking, desiring and willing, the three faculties can be distinguished but never separated.

2. The connection between nature and will

Our examination into the human soul in action points to an intimate connection between a person's nature and will. A person's will is determined in a profound sense by his nature. To assert this is not to deny the free and significant exercise of the will. We are just pointing out a fact that we must take into account in our understanding of the will. To see this, we have to begin with God.

God is a personal being with a will. The whole revelation of God from Genesis 1 to the end of the Bible discloses this fact. The best and highest thoughts that can be attached to the notion of freewill are true of God's will. We all know that if fallen man has freewill at all, it is very limited. Whatever freedom man was endowed with at creation has been heavily compromised and damaged, if not knocked out, by sin. God alone is absolutely free, and he is the source of all freedom for any creature, angelic or human. Having fixed this point, we ask the question: is God's will above his nature? The thought is to be shunned! God's will is the active expression of his nature, and, at the same time, God's nature is the very nature that wills. In God, nature and will cannot be taken apart.

What we have seen as true of God must be applied to man as the image of God. The reason why man has a will is found in God. To make man in his image, God made man with the features of personality that he has, and essential to that is will. This point is important for understanding Adam's pre-fallen state. The act of sinning was not his first act of the will. He began to exercise will as soon as he came from the hand of his maker. When God placed Adam in the Garden, Adam had work given to him that required the exercise of his will (Gen 2.15). God gave him the order to eat freely from any tree of the Garden (v 16). The naming of the animals and the naming and reception of the woman were all acts of the will. In all these exercises of the will, Adam was acting freely according to his nature. Furthermore, in all of this he could not even sin. As Eccl 7.29 states, God made man upright. In his original state, Adam decided and made choices according to his created nature, and all of his choices and deeds were upright. This is the doctrine of original righteousness.

We can describe Adam's original state this way: his actions were self-determined but he was not a self-determined being. He was a God-determined being who carried out self-determining actions.

In Adam's created state, nature and will were unified and inseparable. Yes, his decisions were determined by his nature within his God-given relationships, but both in his nature and will he was a free man. The possibility of sin only came up in relation to that which lay outside of Adam's nature, the knowledge of good and evil. But, even here, the thought of stepping outside of the created bounds of humanity came from the crafty serpent and not from human nature itself.

God will never reverse his ways. He created man so that nature and will be one, and sin had to happen in this unity. Earlier we saw the error of trying to isolate the will within Eve's soul. She fell in the unity of her

being. We see the effect of this in the state of Adam and Eve after the fall. They were trapped. Their minds, their eyes, their self-consciousness, and whatever else they had, were unified in their sinful state. Nothing in them, that is in and of themselves, was exempted. In our next study we will see that the only way out for them was given by God as he opened up a new relationship with them. But, this came from outside of themselves and contrary to their own fallen will.

3. The difference in nature

The aspect of creation that we are considering raises the question how man, created in the image of God and with original righteousness, could fall. What made the fall possible? The easy answer is, "Freewill!" Yes, without the will man could not have sinned. But, this answer will come up against God. In God there is perfect freedom of will, but can God sin because he has a will? No, the Bible makes it absolutely clear that God cannot sin. So, freedom of will does not in itself make the fall possible. We who have our hope in Christ have a vested interest in this fact. In our glorified state, we will have freedom of will in the truest sense, but it is essential to our hope that we will be beyond the possibility of sinning.

God has a will, and we as his image have will. We sin as an act of our will, but God cannot sin as an act of his will? Need we ask what the difference is? God is not a man that he should change (Num 23.19; 1Sam 15.29; Mal 3.6). Romans 1.23 points to the contrast between the glory of the incorruptible God and the corruptible creature. Within God there is no possibility of variation (Jas 1.17). The theological term for this divine attribute is immutability. In contrast to God, man is mutable. Just as God's nature is immutable, his will is immutable. Just as man was created a mutable being, his will is mutable.

B. THE NATURE OF HUMAN FREEDOM

In light of the connection between nature and will, sin appears as a rather bold act. By an act of the will, man ripped himself loose from the law of his maker and from his original state of righteousness. He went against his created nature. As long as man lived in his original state, the exercise of his will fit in perfectly with God's will and his own human nature. It was the natural expression of what he was as the image of God. When people act naturally, we hardly notice the fact of will. But, in the act of sin, the will becomes forward. It steps in the foreground as raw will. This has the effect of drawing the human eye to focus on this self-disclosure of the will and bringing the mind under its spell. Here we must step back and check our focus. We must begin the examination where the will has its beginning, in creation and not in human self-assertion, and then see the wilful act in God's light.

1. The will to rule

In Genesis 1.26 and 28, God gave man his active role in the decree to rule over the earth. The parallel to this in the second creation account is found in Gen 2.15-16. The LORD God placed man in the Garden to work it and guard it and told him that he was free to eat from all the trees (except the one, v 16). Both of the biblical accounts of creation suggest that man's will had its first sphere of operation within his relationship with the earth. A little reflection will impress us with the truth of this. The full exercise of will is not seen in the mere capacity to make a choice but in the power to make a decision and carry it through in action and so to realize one's decision in the world. We see this full exercise of will in God in his work of creating. In man this is realized in his role of ruling over the earth.

The will is a ruling faculty. Now, man was never to rule within his relationship with God but only in relation to the physical world that God put under him. This means to see the full exercise of the power of will in man, we have to look at his God-given relation to the earth.

a. Transcendence

By making man in his image, God gave man transcendence over the creation, and this transcendence enabled him to rule over the world.

Ecclesiastes 3.11 refers to this transcendence when it says that God has set eternity in the hearts of people. The heart is that center of our conscious life where we are before God, where we deliberate and form our decisions and from which our active life proceeds. Here we transcend the varying times in which we have our present experience (Eccl 3.1-10) and can look back and forward, searching for the beginning and the end. How this conditions our decision making process needs to be explored.

b. The power of choice

Human beings are not locked into a stimulus-response relationship with the world. We do not take in stimuli through our senses and then (by the functioning of nerves and brain) automatically respond to them. Rather, whatever we take in by the five senses is taken up by the mind and worked out at the level of truth and moral judgment. At this level, we have three powers that raise us above the world of the senses.

i. The power of the mind

When we receive stimuli through the senses, we do not just react. The mind takes up the sensory stimuli (the experiences of sight, sound, smell, taste and feel) as information in the realm of truth. The connection between our experience of the senses (caused by the world around us) and our action upon the world is broken. From the mind, we must proceed to act with reason. This sets us free from being simply caused to act by what presses in on us.

ii. The power of the choice of the contrary

The mind has the power to look at the other options. When one thing presents itself to my mind, I can turn to look at others things. If other objects are not presented to me, my mind can think up other options. Herein lays the power of the mind. It can always think of an alternative, and this means that nothing in the world has such power over me that in itself it determines my actions.

The power of the mind to consider options gives us the power to choose the contrary. If I make a choice, I know that I could have chosen the opposite. Freewill can be simply defined as this power to choose the contrary.

iii. The power of purpose

The heart never simply responds to the things that bear on it in the present. It has the power to think ahead and envision a future state achieved through the action. It is this envisioned future that is the moving cause for the will. This is purpose. Here people's choices transcend the present, and this prevents any mechanical causality in human action in which the mere influences working on us determine our action. In this purposive action, people are like God who acts only out of his own purpose.

The mind's ability to choose between options that are presented to it is its transcendence over space. The ability to form purpose involves its transcendence over time. By forming a purpose, the self decides on the future (a state that does not exist in the present) and proceeds to bring about that future state. This makes the person responsible for his actions.

We should keep before us the fact that the human person only has this transcendence by virtue of his participation in God's transcendence over the world. In this transcendence, man acts before God and must draw on what belongs to God. Moral responsibility is based on this reality. It cannot be based on the mere fact of freewill as if the raw the power of choice made a person morally responsible. The moral agency of

man is tied to the fact that as the image of God he must participate in the moral order that is given in the will of God for the world.

c. **The choice that leaves one free**

The freedom that God has given mankind to rule over the earth is such that the decisions we make do not take away our essential freedom of choice. If Adam decided to eat a pear instead of an apple, he would maintain his freedom of choice through the act. The choice of a pear would not entrap him to only choose pears from then on. No, his choice did not strip him of his transcendence.

True freedom requires all of the features we have outlined. As the apostle Paul discovered, to have the will to act but not to have the power to carry out the will in action does not give one the self-consciousness of being a free agent but of being a miserable prisoner against one's will (Rom 7.14-25). The only freedom that the apostle acknowledged in the Christian life is the freedom to live out the choice of the inner man by the Spirit (Rom 8.2ff.). At present we are not pursuing this line of biblical truth. We are only pointing out what is involved in full freedom.

After the fall, mankind has become enslaved to creation in many ways. However, God has left mankind with a degree of transcendence which gives us the ability to rule over creation to a certain extent. This alone makes human life possible in the world. Through this transcendence left to us, we all know of the power of freewill in relation to the world around us.

2. **The other relationship**

When God decreed that man rule over the earth, he decreed the full exercise of the power of will. But, there is the other side: man's relationship with God. The creator did not give any decree that gave man a deciding role in this relationship. Man was to rule in his relationship with the earth, but he was not given any power in his relationship with God.

In Genesis 1 man's relationship with God is stated only in terms of God's purpose to make man. The word of God that assigned to man a role in this relationship is given in Genesis 2. This divine word is not a decree but a law forbidding man to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the narrative setting, this is set in direct contrast to God's order that man be free to eat of any of the trees of the Garden (Gen 2.16-17). The point is clear: man's act in relation to God is to be the opposite of his liberty of action in relation to the trees of the Garden.

Man stands between God and the world. He is related on both sides of his being, but the two relationships are not symmetrical. In the one relationship, he is to rule. In the other, he is not to rule. In the one, he is given the order to eat freely. In the other, he is told not to eat. We saw that man was given full exercise of will in his relation to the world. Does the asymmetry mean that he does not have this freedom in his relationship with God? To answer this question, we will work through the features of man's freedom outlined above.

Transcendence: man transcends the physical world around him, and even his physical body. But, he does not transcend God or his relationship with God.

The power of choice: the law imposed a choice on Adam, but it was not the power of choice he enjoyed in relation to the world.

The power of the mind: the forbidden tree set before Adam what he did not have—the knowledge of good and evil. This knowledge was the power to deliberate and decide on what is good and evil, and it belonged to God. Adam was not to take it to himself. The innocent ignorance left Adam with his power over creation in total dependence on God for the decisions as to what is good and bad.

The power of the choice of the contrary: the first law put a choice before Adam, but it was not at all like the choices he made in relation to creation. When Adam had to decide between two trees, he stood in a neutral position. Free from a prior commitment to either, he could choose between the two. He had two positive alternatives: will it be apples or pears? This was not the case with his decision about the forbidden fruit. Adam was in a state of righteousness and enjoyed life. There was no law given to enter life as a choice. In fact, the first law did not command Adam to do anything. It was purely negative. It forbade him to do what he had never done. To choose the contrary was to do something positive, to eat, but this was forbidden. The law commanded Adam to deny himself the freedom to choose the contrary.

Adam had the faculty to decide against God's will but the first law forbade him to exercise this power. While he had the faculty of choice, the knowledge of good and evil was outside of his competence.

The power of purpose: for Adam obeying was simply letting things be as they were set up by God. The law did not propose to Adam a future state in life that he could determine by his choice. The power of purpose only could work in sin and the only future outcome set before him was death.

The tempter turned things around. By the art of interpretation and manipulation of words, he constructed a positive choice out of the first law. He put before Eve the option of becoming like God. This presented to her mind the option of becoming a self-determining being. However, God never put this before Adam, and his created nature would never have come up with the idea.

The choice that leaves one free: Adam would only be left free if he did not make a positive choice. Under the first law, if he acted positively and ate, he would die. To say that under these terms the act would take away his freedom is an extreme understatement.

3. The awful inversion

In creation man was set up between God and the world. The power of making decisions was to go one way: to descend from above. God alone would decide on good and evil. Man would accept his place under God's will, and then live in the sphere of his rule in which he would make and carry out his decisions in his world. The first law presented to man the difference between the exercise of his will in relation to the divine sphere (the knowledge of good and evil) and in relation to the physical sphere.

The first sin was man's act of reversing the order of decision-making. In this reversal, man related to God with the power he had in relation to the creation. He carried his power to rule the world over into his relationship with God. In doing so, the physical fruit of the tree worked as the cause of Eve's action. From here, her stimulated desires worked up to move her mind and will. The effect was catastrophic. Man who was to rule over creation is now driven by the stimulation that comes from this physical world and works through the senses.

The law was given to Adam in his original freedom. It only set before him an action that could make him fall. It did not propose an act through which he could rise. In the fallen world, mankind is still falling, as Rom 1.18-32 testifies. Paul points out how the Gentiles made decisions under the light of the knowledge of God, and the assertion of their will only led to further falling. It looks like the exercise of freewill in a fallen world becomes a free fall.

C. A CLOSER LOOK AT THE WILL OF GOD

The key to understanding God's will is given in the truth that God made man in his image. It is God's will that like God man have a will in order to personally represent God. Man is to exercise his will under God's will, and the divine will is to work in and through the human will. In Genesis 1 we are told how this was to work out in this world. But, it is only in the revelation of God in Christ that we see God's eternal purpose in this.

1. The will of God revealed in Christ

The Son of God is the image of the invisible God (Col 1.15), and it was the Father's eternal purpose that the Son be the first-born among many brethren. In this purpose, the Father predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8.29). This revelation in Christ throws its light back on the creation of man. God made man in his image because of his intention to bring human beings into a participation in the Son's relationship with the Father.

The relationship between the Father and the Son is a genuine personal relationship in which all happens by the free exercise of will. Jesus disclosed the voluntary nature of the relationship in Jn 5.19-20. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he does. The Son can do nothing of himself but willingly does all that he sees the Father doing. This relationship of love was there before the foundation of the world and so is eternal (Jn 17.5-24). To think that God created man in his image to bring him into such a relationship!

As a person of the trinity, there never was in the Son an ego that was independent from the Father or that asserted itself. The Son and the Father are both essentially and willingly one in all of their ways. This essential unity does not exist between God and mankind. The great revelation of God in Christ discloses to us how God brings human beings into the Son's relationship with the Father.

Through the incarnation, the Son joined humanity to his deity. By this incarnation, Jesus is both God and man in one person. This union was possible because man was made in the image of God, and thus humanity could be joined to the Son as the uncreated image of God. Through the first law given to Adam, God defined man's relationship with him as one of obedience. The Son of God carried out the perfect obedience as the Son of Man in his death. He was the one man who was obedient in contrast to Adam in his disobedience (Rom 12.19). As the divine Son, he learned obedience through this (Heb 5.8 and Phil 2.5-8).

It is important for our study to see the personal nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son in the death of Christ. Jesus pointed to this in Jn 10.17-18. The Father gave him the commandment to lay down his life as his own act. This is not something that just happened to him. The Son obeyed the Father's will, and the Father loves him for this reason. On the Father's side, the scriptures teach that the Father gave his Son as an act of love. The Son's act of voluntary obedience means that we can participate in his mind or attitude (Phil 2.5) and become obedient to him in his obedience (Heb 5.8-9).

The Son never asserted his own self against the Father's will and way. In Jn 5.19 Jesus stated that this was impossible. However, such is not the case with us. When Jesus disclosed the way of the cross (Matt 16.21), Peter resisted him (v 22). In response, Jesus as it were pushed Peter behind him (v 23) and stated the law of discipleship. The first requirement is, "If anyone wishes (or wills) to come after me, let him deny himself..." (v 24). For Jesus, such denial of self was both natural and a genuine act of his self-conscious will (Phil 2.6), but it is contrary to our natural self.

Christ's demand that we deny ourselves answers to the first law given to Adam. In relation to God, the first command cannot be something that we do positively. This would contradict creation and the whole divine-human relationship. What we are we are by God's doing. This was true of Adam. He was the image of God set up to rule by God's purpose, work and decree. Adam could do nothing to make himself what he was to be. The decision he had to make was negative—not to assert himself and become self-determining in his relation to God.

2. The positive will of God

So far we have only focused on the negative command because that is what God put before Adam. This negative command is the first law that sets the foundation for all law. The Law of Moses was a covenant, and that means that it defined the relationship between God and Israel. The basis for all regulations in this relationship was this: that the people accept that God's will rather than the human will be the law.

The gospel of God's grace makes it clear that all that we are in relation to God is due to God's doing in Christ. This point is pressed home in Eph 2.8-9: "For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." The grace does not stop here. Paul opens up the work of this grace in the following verse: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (v 10).

None of these good works are works of self-determination. The apostle stresses that we are God's workmanship created for the good works. That means that only God's work makes us what we are. We also have no role in determining the good works we are to do. Those works have been prepared beforehand, i.e., before we have personally become God's new creation. Our role is only that of participation in Christ.

The gospel does not deny the significant role the human will plays in the divine-human relationship. It puts the human will in its proper place. The human will can only function properly within a relationship with God, and this relationship must be God's work. The exercise of the human will must take place not only under God's will but also within God's work in and through us. For this, man must do God's will out of his God given nature, and that divine nature is given to us through regeneration (the new birth). The work of God in the new creation lifts us above and beyond what God did in the first creation, but it is true to the alignment between God and mankind set in the creation of Adam.

3. Human self-consciousness

The way revelation aligns the human will goes against the way we naturally feel about ourselves, but we must keep in mind that our native self-consciousness has been shaped by sin. It was shaped by the wilful self-consciousness developed in the first sin and by the way the sinful and blinded mind takes up the issue that the conscience presses on the heart.

In 1John 3.4 we are told that sin is lawlessness. Lawlessness is not the same as the transgression of the law. Transgression is the breaking of a specific command, and Adam did that. But, lawlessness characterizes all sin, whether there is a specific command or not. It is the state of mind that does not place the self under law. In lawlessness, the will with all of the force of nature behind it rises up and takes the place of the law of God. The first sin was an act of such lawlessness. God did not give Adam a specific behavioural command. Rather, he put before him the underlying principle behind all obedience. Man must take his place under God's will and not assert himself and his nature to determine what is right and wrong. When Eve and Adam sinned, they asserted themselves against God, and this brought the act of the will into the foreground. This original sin has shaped the self-consciousness of all of the children of Adam, and this accounts of the universal sense that people are self-determining in relation to the divine.

The conscience brings into the sinner's self-consciousness the sense of guilt that he is responsible for what he has made himself. This is true to the first law which made Adam responsible for what he made himself through the sin. But, in the deception of sin, man thinks that this sense of personal responsibility for sin applies to his righteousness and blessedness. This way of thinking gets an apparent verification from the Law of Moses. Moses set before the Israelites life and death and blessing and cursing. Obedience under the Law is proposed as the means to blessing and life. However, the history of Israel showed that the effect of the Law was only death and curse. In view of the chronic failure, the prophets testified that life and blessing must be God's work through the Messiah and the gift of the Spirit, and the gospel takes up the fulfilment of this in Christ.

We should also take note of a split in the human mind on our subject. In the assertion of the sinful will and in the efforts at self-justification, people act with the self-consciousness of freedom. But, the opposite strain of thought also runs through the human mind. This is the idea that people's sinful actions are wholly determined by the influences acting upon them. We see this already in Adam and Eve. When God confronted them with their sin, they pointed to the agents that got them to sin (Gen 3.12-13). When man acts and asserts himself, he believes in freewill to be free to do as he pleased. When he faces judgment, he is a determinist to free himself of moral responsibility.

The gospel does not work on the basis of our natural self-consciousness. Faith is not based on our self-determination or sense of freedom of will. The gospel gives the call to all everywhere to repent and believe. This call does not just address the will but activates it. God's work in saving us goes through our will and brings our will to its proper function. This function is not determined by our natural self-understanding but by the way God set us up in creation and redeems us in Christ. A person must be brought to see himself within the way God relates to him and then take his place within that relationship. A person does not take this step as a mere act of the will. The whole person (or soul) is involved, i.e., the faculties of reason, desire and will.

When we come to Christ, a profound and deep change in the way we know ourselves takes place. We change from seeing ourselves as centered in ourselves to knowing ourselves within God's relationship with us, and this relationship is determined and worked out by God alone. We have the created capacity for faith, but our faith in Christ does not come about by anything natural to us. Faith comes by hearing (in which we receive what comes to us from outside of our own minds) and hearing by the word of Christ (Rom 10.17). In this process the Father draws us to Christ and we are taught of God (Jn 6.44-45).

When we come to Christ, we enter into his work for us. The first side of this work was his crucifixion, and what we receive is the crucifixion of the old man (or self) with him. What we are in our life in Christ is wholly God's work. This work of God does not exempt our will, leaving us one sphere of action that is only ours. The principle for faith is stated in Phil 2.13: "...for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." This is a point of Christian faith. There is "...one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4.6).

So, is man a self-determining being? He was not created to be one. He was to carry out self-determining action in his rule over the earth, but in his own being he was to be God-determined. However, through sin man became a self-determining being. In the first sin, man did not do something to the world but to himself. He changed himself in relation to God by his own act, and the consequences were devastating. He is fully responsible for this. The gospel confirms this. God condemns people for their sins. But, our redemption is not symmetrical with our condemnation. Our salvation is God-determined and not self-determined. This is what is laid hold of by faith. The fact that faith is an act of our will does not change this. We were created in the image of God. This means that what God does for us is not left to God apart from us. Rather, it is worked in and through us. In faith, the human will participates in God's will, and the divine will works through the human (and not the other way around). This is the true dignity of the will, the will as it was created to function. Anything else is a degradation of our created dignity. This does not agree with our natural (fallen) self-consciousness, but it is true to God and creation and that is what determines righteousness and justice.