

Free to Choose

By David de Bruyn

Did you ever stop to ask, 'What is the difference between one Christian and another? Why are some going on for God, growing in grace, becoming more like the Master, abounding in fruitfulness, while others are languishing in worldliness, remaining lukewarm, seemingly far from God?

What makes the difference between one and the other? Do some receive more grace? Do some have a more complete Bible? Do some get more of the Holy Spirit? Do some have better natural abilities than others? Well, none of this can be true because all Christians have the same grace available to them. In fact, we read in **2 Peter 1:3**, "*as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.*"

So if all Christians have all the resources they need for life and godliness, what is the missing factor that explains why some Christians seem to use these resources, and others don't? The answer is choice.

Choice – the ability to use our wills to make decisions. This ability to choose makes up a large portion of what God meant when He said, "*Let us make man in our image*" (**Genesis 1:6**). He made man unlike the animals in that man was a rational, reasoning, moral being, capable of awareness about himself, His God, and thereby capable of making rational, self-aware decisions and choices.

And from the word go, God tested this moral responsibility by placing the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. Man failed that test, and he fell into sin. With that fall went his will – which was now bent to sin – to please himself, and not God.

With God's grace, a man may however choose the right and refuse the wrong. And to this end, God appeals to us continually in the Bible to make the right choice. Listen to the tone of **Proverbs 1**, where wisdom is personified as a woman crying out in the streets. Everything in this passage suggests that man must choose:

Wisdom calls aloud outside; she raises her voice in the open squares. She cries out in the chief concourses, at the openings of the gates in the city she speaks her words: "How long, you simple ones, will you love simplicity? For scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge. Turn at my rebuke; surely, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded, because you disdained all my counsel, and would have none of my rebuke, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes, when your terror comes like a storm, and your destruction comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.' Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; They will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, they would have none of my counsel and despised my every rebuke. Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies.'

Proverbs 1:20-31

Man is in an epidemic of refusing to accept the reality and consequence of choice. On the one hand, people everywhere are crying out for the privilege of choice – 'Give me my rights, give me options, and give me the choice to decide for myself. I want 50 different flavours, 30 different channels, I want variety and I want my right to choose any one of them!'

But then, on the other hand, once man makes choices, he blames others. Bogus and foolish lawsuits abound – overweight people are suing fast food companies for being fat, people with lung cancer are suing tobacco companies. In other words, ‘I want the privilege of making the choice to eat what I want, or to smoke, but I don’t want the responsibility that comes with making that choice.’

I read of a court case where an injured burglar sued for compensation after being injured while breaking into a house. ‘I want and demand the privilege of making any choice I want, but if the responsibility that comes with my choice is negative, then I refuse it, and pass the buck to someone else.’

On the other extreme, you have the fatalists who tell us that no one ever has any choice. Everything, even how spiritual you will be in your walk with God, has been pre-arranged, and what seems like a choice to you is really an illusion.

Cutting through all this falseness is the Bible’s teaching on human responsibility. Christians need to be reminded of the Biblical truth – ‘I am a free, moral agent.’ That does not mean I am the captain of my destiny. It does not mean I can do what I please. It means God has authorised me to choose. He has given me the privilege and the responsibility of moral choice.

One of the pillars of Christian character is to realise this fact and take up the challenge. Perhaps the best teaching on human responsibility is found in the Lord Jesus’ Parable of the Talents in **Matthew 25**:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man travelling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.

After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'

But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.

Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Matthew 25:14-30

God authorises us to choose.

The master gave the talents to his stewards and left it in their hands. He authorised them to use his money for his good. Here the Lord pictures everything He gives to His servants as a stewardship to be used for His glory. It includes life, opportunity, ability, possessions, money, status, and of course – moral responsibility. The ability to choose is a stewardship given to man by God.

I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live

Deuteronomy 30:19

And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

Joshua 24:15

God's sovereignty does not negate man's choice. Instead, God's sovereignty encompasses and includes it. Great thinkers of the past have always seen this balance. Hear for example, the words of that great prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, as he said the following:

"I know there is an easy way of getting out of this great deep, either by denying predestination altogether or by denying free-agency altogether, but if you can hold the two, if you can say, 'Yes, my consciousness teaches me that man does as he wills, but my faith teaches me that God does as He wills, and these two are not contrary the one to the other; and yet I cannot tell how it is, I cannot tell how God effects his end, I can only wonder and admire, and say, 'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.' Every creature free and doing as it wills, yet God more free still and doing as He wills, not only in heaven but among the inhabitants of this lower earth."

Spurgeon did not believe in free will, but he did believe in free agency. Man is a free agent in that he is responsible to choose.

Man's will is of course not perfectly free. His will is affected by many things, like his desires, his emotions, and his environment. But that does not take away from the fact that man remains a morally culpable being who is instructed to choose the right and refuse the wrong. A danger always lies in overemphasising either God's sovereignty or man's responsibility.

But if we are not careful, we can get the idea that God's sovereignty will even take care of our spiritual responsibility, that it doesn't really matter what we do, since God is guiding the whole thing. That's a very serious mistake.

God's sovereignty has chosen to give man choice. And God will allow good and bad consequences to come as a result of our choices. Therefore we are to take great care that all day, every day, we realise – 'I am a free, moral agent. God controls my life in the final sense. But He allows me to shape much of what I will be, by giving me the privilege of choice.'

As **Isaiah 1:19-20** tells us, *"If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it."*

God may give differing abilities, but He gives us all equal freedom of choice.

The one who had received one talent had just as much potential to double his allotment, and thereby please the master. The key difference that the Lord was emphasising was not ability or opportunity, but responsibility – choice.

There is *always* a choice I can make to please God.

God is not impressed with your abilities – He gave those to you. He is not impressed with your opportunities – He gave those to you as well. What pleases God is when we take responsibility and do the things He expects.

The point of the parable is not the quantity that each brought back. It was the faithfulness of the two that allowed them to double what was given to them. We are probably right in speculating that had the servant with just one talent earned just another one, he too, would have been called good and faithful.

God has given us everything we need to make God-pleasing decisions. He has given us everything we need to be victorious Christians.

He has told us what He expects in the Word. He has repeated it. He has explained it. He has illustrated it with the lives of Bible characters. He has modelled it in His Son coming among us. He has made it possible to meet His expectations through Calvary's forgiveness and salvation. He has given us His Holy Spirit to enable us. He has made allowance for failure.

Now let me sing to my Well-beloved. A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?

Isaiah 5:1-4

What then makes the difference between the Christian that goes on for God, and the one that doesn't? The answer is – that Christian. They are given the same Bible, the same Holy Spirit, the same position in Christ, the same ability to obey. What makes the difference? One chooses to obey – the other doesn't.

Who you are is reflected by the choices you make.

The one servant was called 'wicked and slothful.' The other two were called 'good and faithful.' The choices I make every moment are a reflection of who I am – what I want, what I love.

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.

Matthew 12:33-35

When you are fleshly, you indulge the flesh. When you are spiritual, you feed the spirit.

The world teaches, 'We are good people that sometimes do bad things.' The Bible teaches, 'What you do reflects who you are.'

The choices you make determine what you will become.

The two that made the choice to be diligent, became responsible for more. They were rewarded. The one who chose not to was punished and suffered.

What we sow is what we reap. Our choices add up to explain who we are and what we will become. As **Galatians 6:7-8** says, "*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.*"

The idea is – what you put in, what you choose to do now, is what you will receive back. If you make choice after choice after choice to please yourself, you will reap corruption. If you make choice after choice after choice to please God, you will reap life – real life, and eternal rewards.

You are as spiritual as you want to be. What you are now spiritually is only because that is the sum of your choices toward God and His Word. What has stopped you from going after God wholeheartedly? What has prevented you from seeking God diligently? What has hindered you from pursuing God passionately? The truth is – nothing. It is only we ourselves who choose to do things half-heartedly.

The measure in which you sow is the measure in which you reap.

But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.

2 Corinthians 9:6

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.

Luke 6:38

This is not the 'health, wealth and prosperity' gospel. Nor is it the 'Word-faith, name it and claim it.' It is the biblical truth that God has created us morally responsible agents, and what we sow spiritually, we reap.

What an exciting prospect – that God has placed into our hands the kind of spiritual future we will have, both in this life and the next. God did not pre-ordain some of us to mediocrity, some of us to lukewarmness and others to spiritual victory. God graciously placed it back into our hands.

You will be held fully accountable for your choices.

When brought to account, the lazy servant made excuses and tried to blame the master for his poor performance. 'You are a hard man. You reap where you do not sow. You have unreasonable expectations. You expect the impossible.'

The Bible is full of excuses that man makes for himself. 'It was the woman that you gave me – she made me eat.' 'I had to do it.' 'I'm too weak.' 'I'm too tired.' 'I'm too busy.' 'I can't manage it.' 'I'm different from others.' 'Look at so-and-so, look how they hurt me or discouraged me or confused me.'

The ones with 5 and 2 talents could also have made excuses. 'Five was too much for me.' 'Two wasn't enough.' But they made no excuses – they simply made choices. They chose to obey, to submit to their master's instructions with all their hearts.

Many are looking for some kind of spiritual jump-start – this special speaker, so-and-so's books, this new fad, some new spiritual phenomenon. It's self-deception, because the missing ingredient is their decision to submit to God. To begin doing the things they *know* He expects of them. No one can make the choice to love God for you. No one can make choices for you in the measure that you need to. The truth is: God continues to set before us life and death, and says to us, 'Choose life.'

That produces two things – conviction and hope. It is convicting to know that my present spiritual state is what it is because of my choices. God did not preordain me to spiritual lukewarmness. He works in me to will and to do of His good pleasure, but then commands me to work out my salvation with fear and trembling.

At the same time, it is a tremendously freeing thought, that God has not willed that I be spiritually immature, or lukewarm. He wants me to grow, and has given me all things necessary to do so. What remains is that I do it.

Choice – it is a daunting and freeing thing. It is a privilege and a responsibility. May we, with God's grace, choose what pleases Him, knowing we are spiritually what we choose to be.