

The Concept of Free Will

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Free will is the first of the ideological questions servants must learn to handle, because nearly every modern error — hedonism, determinism, moral relativism, and the gospel of self-expression — collapses at the point where the Church's teaching on freedom stands. Scripture opens with a God who sets before humanity life and death and invites a choice (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19-20), and the Fathers have guarded that same gift against two extremes: the fatalism that denies choice and the license that mistakes choice for autonomy from God. This lesson sets forth the Orthodox understanding of free will — as a true faculty given by God, bounded by responsibility, perfected by grace, and completed only in the service of righteousness. The lesson proceeds from the scriptural ground of human freedom, through the questions of accountability, limits, and self-harm, into the deeper question of what freedom actually is — not the absence of restraint, but liberation from sin through Christ. A servant of the Church must be able to teach this clearly to a generation that confuses freedom with appetite.

Freedom as Gift and Invitation

The Orthodox doctrine of free will does not begin with human autonomy; it begins at creation. God is under no constraint to create a creature capable of refusing Him, and yet He did so. Freedom is the shape of His image in us. Without it we could not love, because love that is compelled is not love at all. The opening of the covenant in Deuteronomy frames the whole moral life as a summons to choose:

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live, that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life." Deuteronomy 30:15, 19-20

Two things must be noticed in this passage, because modern readers frequently miss them. First, God does not merely permit the choice; He commands it, "choose life." Freedom is not a neutral field in which any outcome is equally welcome to Him. Second, the alternative is not between two goods but between life and death. The whole of Scripture assumes that freedom is ordered toward a real end, and that end is communion with God.

St. Basil the Great describes the interior structure that makes this choice possible:

"There is a certain balance constructed in the interior of each of us by our Creator, on which it is possible to judge the nature of things. 'I have set before you life and death, good and evil,' two natures contrary to each other. Balance them against each other in your own tribunal."

The human person is, in St. Basil's image, a living court of law, summoned every day to weigh and decide. God's foreknowledge of what we will choose does not force that choice; He knows because He sees, not because He compels.

Freedom and the Divine Image

The Fathers are united in teaching that free will belongs to the divine image in man. When Genesis records that God made humanity "in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Genesis 1:26), the image includes rationality, self-mastery, and the capacity to choose the good. A creature that could not choose could not bear that image. This is why the Church rejects every form of hard determinism, whether philosophical, theological, or scientific in disguise. To deny free will is to deny that humanity bears the image of God.

At the same time, the image does not make us gods. Freedom in the creature is always a participated freedom, bounded by the nature we have received. We are free in the way fish are free in the sea — within the medium that sustains us. To leap out of that medium in the name of freedom is not liberation but destruction. This is the first correction we must bring to the modern notion of freedom as raw possibility.

Because free will is a gift from God, it can only flourish when exercised toward the Giver. A freedom turned against its source hollows itself out. St. Paul's description of this self-undoing is precise: "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13). The call to liberty and the call to service are one call.

Accountability and Responsibility

A person who is not free cannot be held responsible. This principle is assumed everywhere in Scripture. Adam and Eve were free, and their disobedience was answered with a judgment that fit their freedom: "Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9). The question is not addressed to a puppet. God interrogates them, hears their excuses, and pronounces consequences, because they were accountable (Genesis 3:9-19).

The same principle runs through the teaching of Christ. When Pilate claimed a power over Jesus that Pilate did not truly possess, the Lord answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin" (John 19:11). Degrees of knowledge and degrees of power produce degrees of responsibility, but responsibility itself is a given. To strip a person of responsibility in the name of compassion is to strip away their dignity.

Christ teaches that the reward of a good deed done freely is doubled, given in secret, kept for the age to come: "your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Matthew 6:4, 6). And the punishment of a sin committed freely, if unrepented, is likewise carried into eternity. The Lord's warning is sobering:

"I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse

sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Luke 13:3-5

Christ does not equate suffering with greater guilt; He uses calamity as a summons to repentance. Accountability before God is universal because freedom is universal.

Do We Have Absolute Freedom?

Modern culture often treats "freedom" as if it meant the absence of all constraint. This is a confusion. Absolute freedom belongs only to God, because only God is subject to no higher good. Creaturely freedom is always exercised within limits — the limits of our nature, the rights of our neighbors, and the commandments of God. To imagine that we can do whatever we please simply because we can imagine doing it is not a liberty the Scriptures recognize.

The Apostle teaches obedience to lawful authority not as a concession to power but as a recognition of God's ordering of the world:

“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.” Romans 13:1-2

This passage is not a license for tyranny. St. Augustine draws the correct distinction between temporal and spiritual obedience:

"Because we are made of soul and body and as long as we are in this life we make use of temporal things as a means of living this life, it is fitting that, as far as this life is concerned, we be subject to the authorities... But as far as the spiritual side is concerned, in which we believe in God and are called into His kingdom, it is not right for us to be subject to any man who seeks to overturn in us the very thing which God has been pleased to grant us so that we might obtain eternal life."

The Christian obeys the laws of the land in temporal matters. When an earthly authority commands what God forbids, however, the Christian must refuse, remembering the apostolic rule: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Freedom, therefore, is never a solvent for the commandments. It is exercised inside them.

Self-Inflicted Harm and the Sanctity of the Body

The notion that a person has an unqualified right to do as he wishes with his own body is a common argument in contemporary debates over suicide, euthanasia, recreational drug use, mutilation, and the destruction of health for pleasure. The Church answers this argument by denying its premise. The body is not simply our possession. It is a gift received and a gift redeemed, belonging by creation to God and by redemption to Christ. St. Paul writes:

“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.” 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

The language is striking. We are "not our own." This is not a denial of personhood; it is a relocation of the self within the order of grace. A temple does not belong to itself; it belongs to the One who dwells there.

St. Cyprian presses the point with liturgical reverence:

"Let us glorify God and bear Him in a pure and spotless body, and with more perfect observance. Let those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ submit to the rule of our Redeemer with the absolute obedience of servants. Let us take care not to bring anything unclean or defiled into the temple of God, lest He be offended and leave the abode where He dwells." THE DRESS OF VIRGINS 2.28

To harm one's body deliberately — through suicide, through chronic substance abuse, through the destructive use of pleasure — is not a neutral exercise of private freedom. It is a defilement of a sanctuary and a wound inflicted on a community that has invested in that person's life.

This is why the Church has always opposed suicide and the deliberate taking of innocent life, however it is dressed. The servant of Christ, when meeting those who suffer, does not respond with the logic of disposability. The response is care, companionship, prayer, and reminding the sufferer that his life is not only his own.

The Benefits of Restriction

A river with no banks is not a freer river; it is a swamp. The banks do not oppose the river; they preserve it. This image captures the Orthodox understanding of moral restriction. The commandments, the canons, the counsels of teachers, the disciplines of parents, and the structures of education and tradition are not enemies of freedom. They are the banks that keep freedom flowing toward life.

The young person who casts off education as a restraint on his autonomy does not become more free. He loses the one tool by which his freedom could be used well. The disciple who abandons the Church's discipline in the name of authenticity does not become more authentic. He becomes more captive to whichever passion governs him that day. True freedom grows where it is guarded, just as a tree grows where it is pruned.

St. Paul warned the Galatians against a false liberty that is really the loss of direction:

“You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ... For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Galatians 5:7, 13

Christian freedom is a freedom for service, not a freedom from discipline. The cry of our age that restriction is oppression must be met with patience and honesty: it is not restriction that enslaves, but unrestrained appetite.

Freedom From Sin

True freedom is not simply the power to choose among options; it is freedom from sin. A will that is dominated by passion is not a free will at all, because it can no longer choose the good it recognizes. Christ's own definition is the standard: "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

This is why the Church has always read the Exodus typologically. The Israelites' departure from Egypt — the house of bondage and the land of fleshpots — through the waters of the Red Sea into the wilderness is a figure of baptism and the moral pilgrimage of the Christian. Egypt represents the comfort of sin, the Red Sea represents baptism, the wilderness represents the life of discipline. A soul that refuses to leave Egypt, however eloquently it speaks of freedom, remains enslaved.

St. Augustine describes the stages of this liberation:

"The first stage of freedom, then, is to abstain from sins — such as murder, adultery, any sexual sins, theft, fraud, sacrilege, and others of that sort. When someone has started getting free from these (and every Christian ought to be so), they begin to raise their head towards freedom. Do not then abuse your freedom for the purpose of sinning freely. Rather, use it in order not to sin at all. Your will is free only if it is godly. You will be free if you become the servant of righteousness."

The paradox at the heart of the Gospel is that the servant of God is the only free man.

St. Cyril of Alexandria adds that no one can be truly free who is set free by someone who does not himself possess freedom. Only the Son — "God of God and the genuine and free fruit of the essence that reigns over all" — can bestow real liberty:

"Because he is wisdom and light and power by nature, he makes those who are ignorant wise. He enlightens those in darkness, and he strengthens those who are weak... when the Son himself wills to free anyone, infusing his own good into them, they are called free indeed."

Every program of human liberation that bypasses Christ ends in a subtler servitude.

Internal and External Freedom

The Orthodox tradition distinguishes two aspects of freedom that must never be separated. Internal freedom is liberation from the passions — from hatred, lust, envy, cruelty, laziness, and greed. External freedom is the capacity to act upon the world according to one's will. When internal freedom is present, external freedom is exercised well. When internal freedom is absent, external freedom becomes dangerous.

A person who has not mastered anger will use his tongue and his hands to wound. A person who has not mastered lust will use beauty and companionship to consume. A person who has not mastered laziness will use time and resources to waste. In every case, the external capacity becomes a weapon turned against others and against the self. This is the tragedy of a culture that maximizes external freedom while neglecting the interior life: it produces people who have every right and no virtue.

The priority, then, is always the interior first. We do not wait until we are perfect to act; but we recognize that the cultivation of virtue is what makes action Christian. Monastic formation, spiritual direction, fasting, almsgiving, and the sacramental life are not add-ons to the Christian life. They are the very training that makes freedom usable.

The Virtue of Self-Control

Real freedom is attained by restraint. The person who refuses every discipline spoils himself, and the spoiled self is not a free self. This is the point on which the ancient Greek wisdom, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Fathers all converge. Proverbs states it with great economy: "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls" (Proverbs 25:28). A city without walls is a city that belongs to whoever shows up to plunder it. So too a soul without self-control.

The Epistle of James gives this principle extended attention, particularly in regard to the tongue:

"For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!" James 3:2-5

The Apostle does not praise the person who has no passions; he praises the person who has brought his passions under a rider. The image is exact. The horse is powerful and useful, but only when bridled. The passions are strong and, under control, can be turned toward service. Untamed, they throw the rider.

St. John Cassian warns of what is lost without this virtue:

"How injurious the absence of [self-control] is... herein lies wisdom, herein lies intelligence and understanding without which our inward house cannot be built and spiritual riches cannot be gathered together. As it is written, 'A house is built with wisdom, and again it is set up with intelligence. With understanding the storehouses are filled with all precious riches and good things.'"

The spiritual life is a house; self-control is the foundation.

The Tongue and the Sound Mind

A generation that has deified self-expression needs to hear the Fathers on the tongue. St. Augustine notes the humility required: "Note that the comparison is taken from the beasts which we are able to tame. The horse does not tame itself, nor does a man do so. A man is needed in order to tame a horse, and in the same way, God is needed in order to tame a man." The taming of speech is not a self-improvement project. It is a work of grace.

St. Jerome gives the sternest of warnings: "The sword kills the body, but the tongue kills the soul. The tongue knows no moderation — either it is a great good or it is a great evil. It is a great good when it acknowledges that Christ is God, and a great evil when it denies that... What more monstrous sin is there than blasphemy against God? The devil did not fall because he committed theft, murder, or adultery; he fell because of his tongue. He said: 'I will scale the heavens; above the stars I will set up my throne, I will be like the Most High.'" Satan's primordial sin was a speech-act. Pride found its voice, and that voice became the first falsehood.

St. Cyril of Alexandria completes the teaching: "The effective proof of a sound mind and perfect thought is to have nothing faulty on our tongue and to keep our mouths closed when necessary... For the most useful talent is to be able to speak wisdom when talking about how to live well. Foolish talk should be foreign to the saints." The servant of Christ is not known chiefly by the volume of his speech, but by its weight.

These counsels contradict almost every rule of a social-media culture in which unfiltered self-expression is treated as the highest virtue. The Church offers a different criterion: speech is Christian when it blesses God and builds up the neighbor. Anything else is not liberty; it is the fire James described.

Pastoral Implications for the Servant

The servant of the Church will meet three distortions of free will again and again, and must be prepared to answer each.

The first distortion is fatalism — the claim that we are determined by genes, by upbringing, by trauma, by our algorithms, by our wounds, and therefore not truly responsible. The Church answers that wounds and weaknesses are real and must be addressed with compassion, but that freedom is also real. No Christian account of the person reduces the soul to a product of forces. To tell a struggler that he is merely a function of his past is to abandon him to that past.

The second distortion is license — the claim that freedom is the absence of moral limits. This is the cultural air we breathe. The servant meets it not with a lecture but with a better vision of freedom: freedom as communion with God, freedom as virtue, freedom as the shape of a life that is finally going somewhere.

The third distortion is despair — the claim that because I cannot change, I am not free. This is the sorrow that visits the addict, the long-term sinner, the weary penitent. The Church's answer is the Gospel itself. Christ has set us free. His grace is stronger than our habit. Repentance is a door that never closes in this life.

We are born with free will, but freedom is not self-evident; it must be learned. We can, like Adam and Eve, squander it in transgression; we can, like the saints, offer it back to the Giver in obedience and love. The Church teaches us to weigh our thoughts, words, and actions against the standard of the Kingdom, remembering that the time on earth shapes the age to come. God is merciful, but His mercy is not indifference. He wills our freedom to be completed in Him.

St. Justin Martyr summarizes the matter with characteristic clarity:

"As in the beginning He created us when we were not, so do we consider that, in like manner, those who choose what is pleasing to Him are, on account of their choice, deemed worthy of incorruption and of fellowship with Him. For the coming into being at first was not in our own power; and in order that we may follow those things which please Him, choosing them by means of the rational faculties He has Himself endowed us with, He both persuades us and leads us to faith."

Being was not ours to choose; the direction of our being is.



Review Questions

1. When are we permitted to practice external freedom? (A: Once one is freed from sin internally.)
2. True or false. One's thoughts do not have to be subject to self control. (A: False)
3. What is true freedom, from the Christian perspective? (A: True freedom is not the ability to do as we please but freedom from sin.)
4. What is the purpose of our freedom? (A: It allows autonomy; it makes us accountable for whatever we do, whether good or evil.)
5. What are certain benefits of restriction? (A: Restrictions are useful because they prevent one from doing harm to oneself, others, or to the community; also they lead to the prevention of breaking God's commandments.)
6. True or false? Your body belongs to you, and you alone. (A: False)
7. What is the fallacy in one doing what they please with no self control? (A: They are in fact dominated by lusts, riches, etc.)