

Commands to The Unable

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Bible Text: John 11:43

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I'm glad to see each and every one of you. I've been kind of struggling with a handicap more than my normal handicaps and that's kind of a bronchial sinus thing this last two weeks.

I want you to turn this morning first of all in John 11 and I want to read just one verse of Scripture here that is a statement by our Lord Jesus Christ on the occasion of Lazarus' death and his standing before the tomb of Lazarus and that is the 43rd verse.

“And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.”

Now, I don't know of a better verse of Scripture, a better situation whereby we can see this condition, this state and condition that grace meets, that the gospel meets because Lazarus here is commanded to do what he cannot do and the reason he cannot do it of himself, is because he is dead. And in the gospel, men and women are commanded to do what they cannot do and that is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and the reason that they cannot do that is because they are dead spiritually. That is the state that the Bible describes all in Adam to be in.

But to show further this spiritual deadness, men logically say that God would not command us to do something that we cannot do. That's just another evidence of that spiritual deadness and it is the very logic that forms the basis for such foolish notions as free will, provides the basis for all of modern decisionalism, I call it. But that is the very thing, if you stop and think about it, that is taking place all the way back in the book of Exodus when Moses is up on Mount Sinai and God is giving him the law while at the same time, at the bottom of that mountain, those Israelites are disobeying that very law. So to say that God would not command us to do, or require of us that which we cannot do, is not to answer this situation and it is not the biblical view of how God in grace and mercy, has dealt with this situation.

So, there goes on this debate whereby set against each other, on the one hand is God's sovereignty and on the other hand, man's responsibility. But we have to be careful when we talk about man's responsibility lest we forget that there really is no ability in man's

responsibility. Just because he is responsible to God and responsible to obey and responsible to do these things, that does not mean automatically that he has this necessary ability and that is why salvation has to be all of grace. That's why salvation has to be all of the Lord. That's why it has to be all by God's saving power because if you look back in John 6, our Lord made two statements, unmistakable statements, that show the absolute deadness and inability of any sinner to do anything positive toward God. In John 6:44, he states this matter of inability, "No man can," and I'm not a star English pupil from way back but I do remember the teacher talking about the difference between "may" and "can." "May" having to do with permission and "can" having to do with ability. "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day."

And after he says that, some immediately demonstrate just the very thing that he has stated. So, he goes on just a little bit later and he restates that in John 6:65, "And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father." And you would think that these two statements, as well as some others, were not even in the Bibles that modern religion carries so religiously. He simply said, "No man can, of himself, by himself, come unto me, believe on me."

So, why does God command men and women to do what they cannot do? Well, there are a number of reasons. I believe the first one is to show us our helplessness, our inability, our weakness, our inability to do the least thing in saving ourselves. Then he does it also, I think, to show us his power. He does those things which bring glory to him and him alone and he does it, I do believe, as Scripture says, to magnify and glorify his free grace, to show us that salvation must be all of God's free grace. And he does it to show us that he and what he does is the difference. Men say, "God loves everybody." They follow that with "Christ died for everybody." Then they follow that with the Holy Spirit trying to save everybody so the difference in salvation if God has done all he can do, that would leave the difference in salvation in your hands or my hand or the hands of other rebel sinners such as we are. But he makes these statements and he says these things to show our helplessness and to show that it is what he does in salvation that makes the difference.

Paul said to those believers in one place and it says it to us, "Who makes you to differ? And what do you have that you did not receive and if you received it, why are you glorying in it?" If you don't have anything except what God alone gave you, if you cannot attribute your salvation to anybody but God in Christ alone, that means that you and I can only make our boast in the Lord. We do not believe that God purposed to save every person an while it is obvious that the gospel has not gone out to all men without exception, we do believe as the Scripture commands us and as God has directed us, that as far as we are enabled, we are to preach the gospel to every creature. We do that because God commands it. We do it because God gives glory in the preaching of his Son and we do not believe that any are born again without and apart from the gospel. That's because the object of that faith that God gives in the new birth, the object of that faith is revealed in the gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ.

But we do not believe in gospel regeneration. That is, we do not believe that simply because the gospel is preached that men and women will buy it, be born of God and believe. We know that it must be attended by divine power. The gospel goes out as it is proclaimed in this world and I'm talking about the true gospel. I'm talking about that gospel wherein the righteousness of God is revealed, declared, made manifest but that gospel as truly preached as it might be and I do pray it be more clearly preached, but that gospel falls on the ears and in the minds and hearts of all who are of themselves still spiritually dead.

We are preaching to the dead. We are commanding things from God that they are unable even to hear spiritually, less believe. We do these things at God's command and we know like that old hymn writer wrote in his hymn when he said, "All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One come down." That is my prayer for these days in which we live. I know that there is not a lot of true gospel preaching that goes on in this day but while I know that there is not a lot comparatively, I am thankful, I am truly thankful for the amount of true gospel preaching that is going on in our day. God has not left himself without a witness and one thing that always encourages me about this group and the reason you have kind of a special place in my heart, is because that God has laid that burden for the going forth of the gospel on your hearts and you make great efforts to send forth and proclaim the true gospel, that gospel that gives all the glory to God, to everyone that you have opportunity to.

But as we send it forth, as we proclaim it, I am impressed and I pray that it be joined and attended by the power of God's Spirit, especially in this technical age in which we live where I do not or have not met the one who'll hear and it may not even be possible in this lifetime for me to meet them or see them or any of these things. They may simply in a foreign land by virtue of the internet, hear the gospel but where I cannot go and it wouldn't do any good if I could go, that does not limit the Spirit of God. And my prayer is that he would attend what I'm afraid is my often poor preaching of this gospel because the success of the gospel does not depend on my ability or your ability, it depends on the ability of God the Spirit to awake these dead sinners and to reveal Christ in their hearts. You see, God gives the enablement to his people in the hour appointed and they do what they do and they cannot otherwise do.

Now, many a sinner has said when they first heard the true gospel, "I'll never believe that." And right at the head of that list is this sinner. I had notes written in my Bible how that supposedly this verse or that verse proved just the opposite of what is clearly stated in the gospel. But a funny thing happened to me on the way to hell and that was that God not only caused this message to fall on my ears, but brought it to my mind and sealed it to my heart and what I once said I'd never believe, I could not do anything but believe it and the reason is because God gives his people this ability, this enabling by his Spirit to believe to have an understanding of what they could not do otherwise and that hour he appoints, he not only appoints that they will come in contact with this gospel, they'll come in contact with this living Christ, but he'll cause them to hear and to live and to believe.

Lazarus was dead and he could not do what he was commanded to do but he did. Our Lord spoke to this man who had been dead so long that even his sister said, "Well, by now, he sure stinks." And how it must have seemed foolish to them for Christ to stand before his very tomb, this man dead and rotting and say to him, "Lazarus, come forth." You see, when God speaks to his people, it's a very personal and effectual call. He said, "Lazarus." Somebody said, "Well, why did he just say Lazarus?" Well, because if he hadn't called him particularly and individually and distinctively by name, every dead soul in the whole earth would have come to life. And when God speaks to a sinner through this gospel, by that all-knowing, all-wise and almighty Holy Spirit, when he speaks to us, there is no mistake about who he is talking to. We cannot in any activity, we cannot in any working or doing or whatever it is, nothing can drown out the sound of the Spirit of God speaking to our hearts and calling our names. We may run but we can't hide.

So, he speaks effectually and Lazarus could not do what he was commanded to do but he did because the command was attended by divine power and enablement. If you look back in verse 26 and this is what our Lord says to Martha, he says, "And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." Do you believe this? You look at that verse and you tell me what the order is. Religion says if you will believe, you'll live but that would be like saying to a dead person left to themselves, "If you believe or if you move your hand up or wave your finger or something, you'll be made alive." No, "whosoever lives."

This life, if we defined it or dissected it down to its very finest points, we would know, though it is simultaneous, we would know that life must precede faith. Faith is the evidence of life. When a baby is born, we don't expect that baby to cry in order to have life, we rejoice when it cries because by that cry we know it has life and that's the way it is with faith. When a person is brought to forsake all other hopes and to cease from their own works of righteousness and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, when we find in believing and trusting in the blood and righteousness of Christ alone, we rejoice. We know that's a sign of life because the Spirit of God has attended the gospel.

Lazarus came forth. O, he had the rags of the grave clothes on him and I can tell you this: when the Lord brought me forth from death to life, I had a whole lot of the rags of the grave clothes on me and he told those standing by to loosen and let him go and he had to command others in my day who were around me and who he brought in contact with me, to help me get some of those old grave clothes off of me. But I was alive. I did something that there was no way I could do and that was to look outside of myself to the one who I had never seen and fall in love with him and rejoice in him and trust my whole of salvation and eternity in him, this one I had not ever seen. How could I do that? Like one man said one time, "Ain't nobody but a fool or a Christian do that," because the Spirit of God not only commands us but enables us in that command to do what we otherwise could not do.

Turn over to Matthew 9. This is another occasion of one of the miracles of Christ and this is a miracle that constantly repeats. Matthew 9:5, he says to those standing around this paralyzed man, this man sick of the palsy, he says, "For whether is easier, to say, Thy

sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house.” Now, he couldn't do that. It would be like me and you walking by someone in the hospital laying there paralyzed from their neck down and say, “You get up. Get out of your bed. Take that bed and you go home to your house.” Well, he couldn't do that but when Christ commanded him and joined that command with that power, like as was demonstrated what the old theologians used to call “the divine fiat,” that's when our God said, “Let there be light and there was light.” Or as it actually says, “Light be and light was.” He was commanded to do what he was unable to do but he did it. Why? Because of who commanded him.

Turn over to Luke's gospel, chapter 7. This is an occasion when a funeral procession was passing our Lord. Verse 12 says, “Now when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise.”

A lot of people, because they have only the eyes of the flesh, they are impressed by the miraculous things that Christ did while he was here on this earth. They say, “Well, he raised people from the dead.” Well, he sure did but let me tell you something, that is nothing to compare with the power and the glory of that event when he raises a dead sinner to spiritual life.

“And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak.” That can't be, can it? He was commanded to do what he, like Lazarus, was unable to do but he did it and his inability did not alter or diminish Christ's ability. Can we remember that? As we preach the gospel, we call upon people to do what they cannot do of themselves, what they will not do because they have a natural enmity in their hearts toward everything about God and his truth. As those Pharisees were told by life himself, “You will not come to me that you might have life.” That is, that verse alone shows the foolishness of free will, so-called. He said, “You will not will to come to me that you might have life.”

This is a fact, all people are of themselves spiritually dead. As a matter of fact, all the miracles that Christ performed in the gospel accounts, they were all in those that they were done to, given as examples to show the spiritual condition of a sinner. Spiritually dead, spiritually deaf, spiritually blind, spiritually paralyzed, spiritually putrefied but we preach as commanded and we preach what is commanded knowing that we have no power of ourselves, knowing that the most talented preacher, the most learned preacher, the most gifted preacher as far as the ability to define and explain, it'll be in vain if the power is ours alone, if the ability is in those we preach to or bear witness to, because it is all of our God. God will attend his gospel with power to every one of his sheep because he said, “My sheep hear my voice and they follow me.” If they're in this awful condition, if they are by nature unwilling, if they are unable of themselves to do any of these things, even what men say is the most simple thing which is to believe on Christ, because he

long, long told his king that he set on his holy hill, the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, he calls him his king and what is a king unless he has a kingdom and what is a kingdom unless he has subjects in that kingdom? He said to his king, "thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power."

Somebody had a program on, I'm not sure who it was, I don't remember but I remember it was called "Day of Decision." I've got news for you: the day of decision was long before the world ever began and it wasn't sinners deciding, it was God Almighty himself. But God's people, their hope lies in the day of his power. When he comes to them with this message of truth that gives him all the glory, that gives the only hope there is for a real sinner and says to them, "Rise up. Rise up." You know, not only did Christ do this himself but he sent forth those apostles who were a weak bunch of powerless fishermen and left-over tax collectors and stuff like that and he enabled them to do miracles, to go to these dead people and raise them to life.

That actually happens in Acts 3 but that's only the minor miracle because as they went forth preaching the gospel, I don't imagine it was such an eloquent message either. Somebody like Peter who had more fervor than he had brains and yet in the hands of these weak sinners just like today, they preached Christ and him crucified to the dead and God brought them to life because in that same place there in John 6 where Christ said, "No man can come to me," there was an "except, except the Father which has sent me draw him." Now, you ought to go home and do a little word study on that word "draw" there because in religion, you're made to think that that means something like that invites you or exerts a certain little influence on you, or woes you or something like that. That is the same word that is used when Peter drew out his sword and cut off the high priest's servant's ear. It is the same word that is used when they drew the nets in that were overfilled with fishes. They had to be taken. Peter's sword did not just leap out of his own so-called free will and find itself in his hand. Peter had to draw it out. "Except the Father which has sent me draw him." But even before he said that, he stood there in the face of those Pharisees who totally rejected him and he said, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me and him that comes to me I will in no wise cast out."

Let me show you one more passage you're familiar with that I'm sure, but it's found in Ezekiel 37 because here is another picture, long before Christ came, same situation with the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel says in chapter 37:1, "The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of dry bones." Every gospel preacher that has ever stood to preach the true gospel has stood just like old Ezekiel was to a congregation that was nothing but spiritually a valley of dry bones. "And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry." They'd been dead a long time. "And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest." I've always interpreted that as Ezekiel saying, "Lord, if it depends on me, they can't."

"Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones," preach, declare my message upon these bones, "and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." They can't

hear. They've been dead a long time. You're preaching to the grave yard, Ezekiel. "Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live," and what's going to be the evidence that he made them alive? "And ye shall know that I am the Lord. So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them. Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." What's the wind symbolic of in the Scriptures? The Holy Spirit.

"So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army." They did what they couldn't do. They did what Ezekiel could not do for them. He issued the command God gave him, declared the message God put in his heart and mind, the word of the Lord. He preached it to a bunch of dead folks and the Spirit of God made them live and acknowledge Christ as the Lord.

These things ought to encourage us, those of us who preach. Those who to friends and co-workers and such, bear witness of the gospel. And concerning our families, I've decided that the Lord shows us our greatest weakness and inability to help a sinner most in our own families, in our children. If I were to look at my own son, that strangely at 40 I love more now than when he was a kid, but if I was to look at him for any sign of hope or spiritual life, I'd be sorely, sorely grieved. He is dead spiritually but God is alive and he's the life-giver and he can come to the deadest of dead, religiously dead like Saul of Tarsus, morally dead like the woman at the well and he can speak life. He can enable the sinner to do what he couldn't do otherwise which is to believe on Christ.