26-1111wc Neighborly Apologetics

Dr. Del Tackett's Neighborly Apologetics Webinar Series

26-1111wc - *NA- 5-Free Will & Sovereignty, Dr. Del Tackett*

Del's site: deltackett.com, Neighborly Apologetics Series Video link,

Class Resources: NA-links, Our website: wschurchofchrist.org/education.php

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Neighborly Apologetics Summary

26-1111-*Summary: 5-Free Will & Sovereignty* (0:04 - 1:02:02)

Title: *When Sovereignty and Responsibility Meet,* **Facilitator**: Scott Reynolds

1st Half - (0:04 - 23:57) The Problem and the Views

(0:04 - 3:04) Introduction to Free Will and Sovereignty

Welcome, Neighborly Apologetics Context

Dr. Del Tackett opens by thanking participants for taking their precious time to attend, noting that the evening will be a difficult one but one he is looking forward to because the discussion will focus extensively on the character and nature of God, which he would rather do than anything else. He indicates that a number of slides will be used and that, time permitting at the end, the group will pull back for a more conversational chat. The topic for the night is free will and sovereignty, set within the ongoing Neighborly Apologetics series. He reminds those who have followed the series that it rests on the royal law of James 2:8—to love one's neighbor—which is understood not as a mere philosophical statement but as the primary strategy and tactic Jesus left for His followers. Christianity spread in its first two hundred years by this means, and God has entrusted the primary work of the kingdom to ordinary Christian families. The goal is therefore to present the truth of God in a neighborly apologetic manner. Academic apologists are thanked for the foundational work they have done across generations, yet the aim is not to engage "Mrs. Smith" with academic arguments when she is struggling; instead, engagement is to be marked by love, wisdom, kindness, and gentleness. This particular topic especially calls believers into their priestly role of caring for those providentially placed beside them. The series has already covered the resurrection at length, then returned to evil and suffering, absolute truth, pluralism, and most recently faith and reason; free will and sovereignty now follows.

(3:04 - 5:39) Origin of the Categories, Scope of the Topic, and Proper Starting Point

Tackett recalls a survey he conducted years earlier to gather and categorize the issues people wrestle with—not only neighbors who come into contact with believers but also believers

themselves and their families. He had not anticipated that he would later need to address these categories publicly; while he enjoys the work, he acknowledges that the present topic is especially demanding. Free will and sovereignty open onto a wide range of related matters, from naturalism and fatalism (including belief in random processes) to the sovereignty of God and the free will of man. The two primary foci for the evening are God's sovereignty over all things and the free will of man, yet the deeper question is what these realities mean for finite man standing in the presence of an infinite God—the God who told Moses to take off his shoes because he stood on holy ground and who declared His name to be "I AM." Understanding who God is has a proper and profound impact on understanding who we are. The correct order is therefore not to begin with man and then try to understand God, but to begin with God as He has revealed Himself in general revelation and in His Word, and only then to apply that truth to our identity and relationship with Him. The topic is not simple; it leads into questions of naturalism, predestination, foreknowledge, God's perfect will, His permissive will, and process theology. Most of these will be addressed, though a few may be skipped for time.

(5:39 - 7:13) Questions Mrs. Smith May Raise and the Reality of Division Among Christians

As relationships with neighbors deepen, certain questions are likely to surface. Mrs. Smith may struggle with whether she has free will, or she may come from a religious tradition such as Islam that contains a strong element of fatalism. Common questions include whether man has free will, whether God is truly and absolutely sovereign or only partially so, whether God's sovereignty and man's free will are contradictory and therefore impossible to hold together, and whether affirming God's sovereignty destroys man's free will. A further significant question is why so many Christians are divided over these matters. The topic leads into a major division among people who believe the Scriptures—those who differ in their understanding of the free will of man and the sovereignty of God. Tackett announces that he will quickly survey five views in order to highlight their main contours.

(7:13 - 13:29) First View: Naturalism and the Denial of Free Will

The first view flows from the previous session on faith and reason. Naturalism supplies the foundation for the prevailing scientific paradigm; it holds that nothing exists outside of matter and energy, so that man is merely a product of the stuff inside the cosmic cube. Tackett revisits Dr. William Provine for the sake of those who missed the prior session, because Provine's remarks are relevant to the present topic. Provine states that when a person dies he will not be surprised because he will be completely dead; if Provine himself were to live after death he would be surprised, yet at least he would go to hell without the "grinning creatures from Sunday morning." Summarizing what modern evolutionary biology (which he identifies with Darwin's views) teaches "loud and clear," Provine lists no gods, no purpose or forces of any kind, no life after death, no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning in life, and no free will for humans—an idea he calls unintelligible. He notes that Christian humanism is warm and kindly in many ways. Tackett stops the clip, recalling that Provine, in his debate with Dr. Phillip Johnson, affirmed these positions as the consequences of naturalism and evolutionary biology. Provine further claimed he was happier after discarding the Christian notions of his upbringing, which he regarded as fairy tales requiring the suspension of one's mind. The list—no gods or purpose or forces, no ultimate foundation for ethics, and no free will—is the naturalist position under discussion. This view is difficult to maintain because most people possess an innate sense that they have free will, yet the logic of naturalism prevents them from affirming it: if nothing exists except matter and energy,

man is simply the product of random natural processes and is therefore a cause-and-effect machine without free will. Tackett imagines a student in Provine's class raising a hand and asking whether Provine himself is compelled to say that man has no free will; the ensuing exchange illustrates that every assertion, including the denial of free will, would itself be determined by matter and energy, leaving the parties simply waiting for the next predetermined response and rendering conversation purposeless. The conflict is that naturalists claim their view is true, yet consistency requires them to admit they are not saying it because it is true but because they are determined to say it. Related is the mind-body problem: if only physical brain exists, where do the mind, the heart, the will, beneficial motives, and love come from? While few people hold a firm conviction that man has no free will, some, like Provine, feel forced to argue the position lest they open the door to something outside the cosmic cube.

(13:29 - 15:24) Second View: Fatalism Distinguished from Determinism

The next view, treated briefly, is fatalism, found in some Eastern religions and certain Islamic perspectives. It holds that a person is caught in an inescapable destiny, which tends to erode incentive; everything is simply "fated." The source of this destiny is usually ascribed to some higher power or to the unknown force called fate, which has predetermined all that will occur and cannot be altered. Fatalism differs from determinism. Determinism better describes the position Provine advanced: pure cause-and-effect operating in a closed world that contains no higher power and no external fate. One event determines the next in an unbroken chain of dominoes, each knocking over the following one. With fatalism distinguished, attention turns to views that acknowledge the existence of God.

(15:24 - 19:45) Third View: Process Theology and Scriptural Counter-Testimony

Process theology arose from a desire to avoid a totally sovereign God and to grant greater sovereignty to man. Academically it rests on the claim that change is the only absolute reality in the cosmos, so God Himself must be in process and constantly changing. He is often pictured as a grand chess master who does not know in advance what moves will be made, yet is a powerful and skilled player who can respond effectively. Process theology is a liberal theology; most of its adherents do not hold Scripture to be inerrant or necessarily affirm the divinity of Jesus. It represents a step beyond naturalism in that it acknowledges a God, yet that God is essentially a very powerful version of ourselves who does not know the future but can try to steer events. Tackett presents several passages to clarify what Scripture says about God, noting that one may encounter people who have reduced God's sovereignty and elevated man either through exposure to process theologians or through their own reasoning, concluding that God is "out there doing things" without real knowledge of the future. Hebrews 13:8 declares that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever; He is unchanging (immutable). Process theology depends on the idea that God changes, yet Scripture affirms He remains the same. James 1:17 states that every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. Psalm 33:11 adds that the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of His heart through all generations. These texts portray a God who is not merely improvising alongside us. Isaiah 46:9–10 is a favorite: "Remember the former things of long ago. I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.'" Scripture consistently presents God as the sovereign One who is not simply playing the game with us. This leads to the heart of the real division within Christianity.

(19:45 - 21:31) Fourth and Fifth Views: Arminian and Reformed Theology on Sovereignty and Salvation

Both Arminian theology and Reformed theology claim—and in fact hold—a strong belief in the Bible and the Scriptures. Both confess Jesus as Lord and Savior and both affirm that God is sovereign. The difference lies in how sovereign God is and how sovereign man is. The primary issue is not the free will exercised in ordinary decisions such as which shoe to put on first in the morning, but man's role in salvation and the extent to which God's sovereignty reaches into the work of salvation. The Arminian position holds that God's sovereignty does not exercise absolute control over every decision but works within man's free will to accomplish divine plans; man has free will to choose or reject salvation. The Reformed position holds that God's sovereignty exercises absolute control over every decision; man's will has fallen so severely that a work of God is required to bring him to salvation, and man is saved by grace alone. Tackett states he will not pursue the contrast further because the primary purpose is not an intramural debate but the engagement with Mrs. Smith.

(21:31 - 23:57) Engaging Mrs. Smith, the Link to the Problem of Evil, and the Call to Gaze upon God

The aim is to build a deep, trusted relationship in which Mrs. Smith begins to express her struggles. As in the earlier treatment of the problem of evil, one may discover that she hates God because her husband died a horrible death despite her prayers; she is bitter and angry. Classically she is wrestling with the problem of evil. The response is not to lay out an academic solution but to weep and cry with her, then to season speech with salt (as Colossians instructs) so that one may know how to answer each person. The goal is not to do battle with a neighbor who holds the opposite view (Arminian or Reformed); rather, it is to address the notions of man's free will and God's sovereignty in a neighborly way. Mrs. Smith may have rejected God because of events she has experienced, and the problem of evil is closely tied to the present issue: she may conclude that if God were truly sovereign He would have prevented her husband's horrible death. The first and constant step in approaching any of these questions is to go back and gaze upon the face of God—to look at who He is as He has revealed Himself in general revelation and in the special revelation of His Word. The session is therefore about to turn to Scripture to establish a clear understanding of the God who is sovereign.

2nd Half - (23:57 - 1:02:02) Sovereignty, the Tension, and the Heart

(23:57 - 28:40) Scripture Survey Affirming the Absolute Sovereignty of God

Tackett turns to a sustained reading of Scripture so that the Word of God may wash over the hearers and establish a correct understanding of who God is, particularly with respect to His sovereignty. The debate over free will ultimately turns on this question: how sovereign is God, and what boundaries, if any, must be placed upon that sovereignty? Naturalists deny God's existence altogether; once His existence is granted, the issue becomes the extent of His rule. Approximately a dozen passages are read. From Ephesians 1, believers have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will. Matthew 10 declares that not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father, and even the hairs of the head are numbered. First Chronicles affirms that greatness, power, glory, majesty, and splendor belong to the Lord; everything in heaven and earth is His, and He is exalted as head over all. Nehemiah confesses that the Lord alone made the heaven of heavens with all their hosts, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them, and that He preserves them while the host of heaven worships Him. Psalm 83 states that the Lord alone, whose name is the Lord, is Most High over all the earth. Colossians 1 teaches that by Him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, dominions, rulers, or authorities; all things were created through Him and for Him, He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. Isaiah 45 declares that the Lord forms light and creates darkness, makes well-being and creates calamity, and does all these things; He calls the heavens to shower righteousness and the earth to bring forth salvation. The potter-and-clay imagery follows: woe to him who strives with his Maker, a pot among earthen pots; does the clay question the potter? Proverbs 16 notes that the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. Acts 13 records that as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. Ephesians 1 again states that God chose believers in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless, predestining them for adoption according to the purpose of His will to the praise of His glorious grace. Psalm 115 affirms that our God is in the heavens and does all that He pleases. Jeremiah 32 confesses that nothing is too hard for the Lord who made the heavens and the earth by His great power and outstretched arm. Proverbs 19 observes that many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand. These texts collectively present a God whose sovereignty is comprehensive and unconditioned by human limitations.

(28:40 - 34:20) Sproul, Spurgeon, Edwards, and Pink on Sovereignty, Significance, and Rest

R.C. Sproul is quoted to the effect that many Christians salute the sovereignty of God but believe in the sovereignty of man; to say that God's sovereignty is limited by man's freedom is to make man sovereign. The practical issue, therefore, is how much sovereignty will be acknowledged in God versus how much will be reserved for man. Reducing God's sovereignty necessarily raises man's; raising man's sovereignty necessarily reduces God's. Spurgeon observed that no doctrine in the whole Word of God has more excited the hatred of mankind than the truth of the absolute sovereignty of God. Tackett agrees and has seen this repeatedly: increasing God's sovereignty appears to reduce man's significance, and people hate the loss of significance. The caution is therefore that opinions must not be formed from a desire to make man more significant. If a high view of human significance emerges from a study of Scripture, that is acceptable; if the motive is to elevate man and therefore diminish God, the approach is flawed. Jonathan Edwards wrote that absolute sovereignty is what he loves to ascribe to God; it has appeared to him a great part of God's glory, and he has delighted to approach and adore God as sovereign. Some loathe this statement

because sovereignty is not a comfort to them; Tackett attributes the aversion to the same fear of lost significance. Sproul further stated that not one piece of cosmic dust lies outside the scope of God's sovereign providence; in Him we live and move and have our being, and every particle of creation is under His control. A.W. Pink, though not famous in his lifetime, wrote that no revolving world, no shining star, no storm, no creature's movement, no action of men, no errand of angels, no deed of the devil—nothing in the vast universe—can come to pass otherwise than God has eternally purposed. This provides a foundation for faith, a resting place for the intellect, and a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul. It is not blind fate, unbridled evil, man, or devil who rules, but the Lord Almighty according to His own good pleasure and for His own eternal glory. Some cannot understand why sovereignty would bring peace; Tackett believes their struggle is again the perceived loss of human significance. Salvation is the work of God alone: He quickens the soul dead in trespasses and sins and maintains it in spiritual life—the very issue that distinguishes the Arminian and Reformed positions.

(34:20 - 36:10) Scriptural Evidence That Man Possesses a Limited Free Will

The question is then posed whether man appears to have free will, and the Scriptures lead to an affirmative answer. Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it: "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing." He longed to act, yet the people were unwilling. Another striking passage records that the people built high places to Baal in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom to offer their sons and daughters to Molech, though God had not commanded it nor had it even entered His mind that they should commit this abomination. Free will, therefore, means that God has given man the ability to make choices; those choices, however, are limited by nature. Man cannot choose to fly like an eagle or breathe through gills like a shark. He may choose freely, but only within the bounds of his created nature. The questions that follow are whether God's sovereignty makes free will impossible and whether man's free will makes true sovereignty impossible—whether the two are contradictory. These questions matter when engaging someone wrestling with the issue, whether a neighbor, oneself, or one's children. The options appear to be to discard one truth or to seek some balance that allows both to be believed.

(36:10 - 43:18) Contradiction or Mystery? Dual Passages and the Law of Non-Contradiction

Contradictory propositions cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time; this is the law of non-contradiction. Does that law therefore require that free will and divine sovereignty cannot both be true? Tackett often uses the illustration of a jigsaw puzzle: two pieces may appear so dissimilar that one is convinced they cannot both belong, yet when the puzzle is completed they prove essential to the overall picture; the intervening pieces were simply missing. True contradiction would exist only if both pieces claimed to be the same bottom-left corner. The question is whether man's free will and God's total sovereignty constitute such a contradiction that one must be discarded, God's sovereignty reduced, or man's sovereignty increased. Scripture presents both as true. Acts 2:22–23 addresses the men of Israel concerning Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested by God with miracles, wonders, and signs performed in their midst: "this man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." In a single passage God has predetermined the event while the human actors are held accountable for their actions, accountability that presupposes they chose to act. Philippians 2:12–13 commands, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Man

is to work out something that God is simultaneously working in him. Tackett acknowledges that the material is being covered quickly and that a lifetime could be spent on it; some may be frustrated that deeper excavation is not possible. His conclusion is that God is totally sovereign; the passages affirming sovereignty cannot be minimized or reduced. He has predetermined plans and purposes and will carry them out. Romans 9, difficult for some, states that God told Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion," so that it depends not on human will or exertion but on God who has mercy. At the same time, man remains accountable for his actions; when he sets his will contrary to God's righteousness he is held responsible. The tension is therefore not a contradiction but a mystery. In assembling a jigsaw one may say, "This is a mystery; I do not yet see how it fits, but it does." God's Word is absolutely true, His sovereignty is not to be diminished, and man is held accountable. There are depths about God far beyond finite comprehension; wisdom calls us to rest in the wonder of what has been revealed. There is nothing wrong with accepting the truths of Scripture while not knowing how they fit together. Logically they do not occupy the same place at the same time in a contradictory sense; they appear contradictory yet both are true because the Word of God declares them so.

(43:18 - 46:58) C.S. Lewis's Illustration of Eternity, Time, and the Eternal Sacrifice

C.S. Lewis supplied an illustration previously used in the Engagement Project concerning God's sovereign will and knowledge. Before the mountains were born or the earth brought forth, from everlasting to everlasting God is eternal. Jesus declares, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," not "I was the beginning and I will be the end," because He is not caught in time and space as we are; He is the beginning and the end. Every finite earthly illustration falls short at some point, yet Lewis's is particularly helpful. Imagine an infinite sheet of paper stretching from all eternity past to all eternity future in every direction. Upon that infinite paper one draws a small dash representing the entire span of time—the beginning and the end as experienced by those confined to cause-and-effect and change. We know nothing outside change and must not extrapolate our temporal constraints onto God. One of the easiest and most dangerous errors is to trap God inside our time-bound categories. God exists all around the dash; He is the beginning and the end, sees everything, and holds all within His omnipresence. He is present at the beginning and present at the end. The Engagement Project explored the eternality of Christ's sacrifice. When Jesus cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" that cry was eternal because of who God is. God is not subject to process-theological constraints of time; He exists outside them and is ever-present. The cry therefore remains ever before Him—the eternal sacrifice offered on our behalf by which our eternal separation from God was paid for on the cross.

(46:58 - 50:55) Personal Desire to Lose Free Will and the Priority of the Heart

Tackett turns to a few final thoughts on free will, noting a picture he finds especially compelling. Personally he does not understand the fierce battle to maintain one's free will. One of his most constant prayers is that God would take his free will away; he hates it and does not want it. He wants God's will, praying in effect that his free will be removed like a SIM card and God's will inserted. He believes every true believer in Christ shares this longing, and he is convinced that in the glorified state believers will possess God's will and will no longer desire their own. He does not understand why people fight to retain what he wishes to surrender. Attention then shifts to the relationship between will and heart. Jesus taught that out of the heart come evil thoughts and actions—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. A word study reveals that "will" is numerically subordinate to "heart" in Scripture; God speaks far more of the heart, and

when He speaks of the will it is usually His own will, not man's. The phrase "free will" is the common currency of debate, yet Tackett suggests it is the wrong focus. The question is whether the will drives the heart or the heart drives the will. He concludes that the heart drives the will. One sets the will to murder or to lie because of the heart. If the heart drives the will, the will is not free; it cannot act independently of the heart that propels it. The discussion will return to this point after a brief pause for book recommendations.

(50:55 - 53:22) Recommended Resources and Preview of the Next Session

Several books are recommended. A.W. Pink's **The Sovereignty of God**, which Tackett has with him, has been a delight for at least fifty years. J.I. Packer's **Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God** is described as must reading. Stephen Charnock's **The Existence and Attributes of God** belongs on the shelf. Joni Eareckson Tada's **A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty** is warmly commended. Tackett recalls asking her about God's thoughts prior to her diving accident that left her paralyzed; she replied that she pictured God seeing His daughter headed in the wrong direction and, with a loving hand, guiding her onto a new path. Not everyone will understand such a perspective, yet the book is recommended for those struggling with the mysteries of suffering and sovereignty. The next session will address God's existence and nature, particularly those aspects of His character that people find troubling—Mrs. Smith may reject God's existence altogether or struggle with specific attributes. Tackett then stops the shared screen so the remaining time can be spent in conversation about the heart and the mind.

(53:22 - 59:09) The Heart and Mind as the Core Issue for Neighborly Engagement

Drawing on material developed in the Engagement Project, Tackett explains that the mind is the core of the heart and comprises the sum total of all that a person believes to be really real; people act on what they believe is real. The mind and heart together set the will. Scripture is clear that the heart is desperately wicked and deceitful beyond measure. From his own experience, Tackett notes that his heart had no desire for God until the sovereign purpose, plan, and grace of God impregnated it with certain truth claims that turned him toward God; God Himself performed that work. The practical counsel is therefore to avoid getting caught up in philosophical debates about free will when speaking with Mrs. Smith and instead to talk about the heart. What drives a person is not an autonomous faculty called the will that can randomly move left, right, up, or down; the heart and mind, with all their logic and complexity, drive action. We act according to what we believe is really real—that is the heart of the matter. In our own lives, our children's lives, and Mrs. Smith's life the issue is the heart, not an abstract will. The will is set upon what the heart desires. People pursue significance through more followers, compliments about appearance or humor, power, or the best car; they set their will to obtain a new car, produce a video, or take two hundred selfies because the heart believes significance is bound up in others making them feel significant. Truth claims arrive through videos, movies, music, and personal desires. The heart is therefore at the core. Tackett turns the session over to Marc Fey, noting that the hour has been reached.

(59:09 - 1:02:02) Facilitator Remarks, Closing Prayer, and Dismissal

Marc Fey thanks Dr. Tackett and reminds participants that a link to the recording and to the slides will be sent once the recording is uploaded, probably the following morning. Replies to the email are welcomed, and links to previous sessions in the series will also be available. Gratitude is

expressed for those who attended. Because the top of the hour has arrived, the session closes in prayer. Tackett thanks everyone for slogging through difficult material and prays that the Lord will use the Scripture that was read. The prayer thanks the Father for His goodness and kindness and for revealing Himself both in creation and specifically in His Word. It acknowledges that plumbing the depths is difficult because God is infinite, from everlasting to everlasting, the Alpha and the Omega; surprise is unnecessary that finite creatures cannot fully understand Him, yet they can understand what He has told them. The petition is for help to rest in the reality that God is in control—not out of control, not lost, not processing events alongside us—and that His purposes and plans will bring all things to a just, good, and beautiful end. Thanks are given for the gathering of people from various places, perhaps worldwide. Blessing is sought so that the Word may wash and nourish them, enabling them to fulfill their role as a royal priesthood by engaging those providentially placed around them, building deep relationships, and speaking truth into the hearts and minds of those who desperately need to hear of God. All is offered for His glory in Jesus' name. After the amen, Fey thanks everyone once more and bids good night.