

The Natural Man's Struggle with Reformed Theology: Grace vs. Needs

By [Tom Elkin](#)

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I once heard a minister say to a congregation, a lot like this, “thank you very much for coming out tonight,” and when he did, I cringed. Cause, you shouldn't be thanked for worshipping God. So I want you to understand that yea, inside my heart, I thank you for being here, but that ain't why you here, okay? So let's just keep that in mind.

In this series, we've been looking at some different topics. But, we've been looking at what are really, fundamental concepts in the Christian faith. I mean, it's about as basic as they get. And once we moved away from those core, fundamental concepts, we moved into some concepts of our particular understanding of that faith: the Sovereignty of God, Scripture, Heaven, Hell, man as a sinner. Those are just sort of, you know, givens...aren't they? Most Christians believe to some extent, those core concepts. Now, when we shift gears and go into what we believe, the five points of Calvinism and by the way, I have to interrupt myself again — you may have noticed by now that each word has an adjective in front of it and theologically, the debates historically have been over the adjective, not the word. *Total* depravity. We've debated whether it is total or not; not whether we are depraved. *Unconditional* election — we accept election, but is it *unconditional*? Limited atonement. We believe atonement, but is it *limited*? And tonight, *irresistible* grace. So the church has, man, how many pine trees have been cut down to publish all that stuff about the adjectives? But you may have noticed, that as I have talked to you, I haven't talked to you about the adjectives a whole bunch — I have a little bit. I have presented the case — not even trying to do it exclusively because I am not the theologian. We happen to be blessed with some theologians around this church who can do a really good job of explaining it from the pulpit or from this — anywhere. What I've been trying to do is explain how modern man struggles with some of this. And modern man doesn't struggle with the adjective. He struggles with the noun. The same is true tonight. It is the concept of grace that's the problem, not whether or not it's irresistible. So if you'll bear with me, we are gonna keep on following the same pattern. So, irresistible grace. T-U-L-I...there is not an adjective with a “p,” but I'll come up with one if you want me to. But anyway, tonight we are dealing with the concept of grace versus the concept of needs.

Now, irresistible grace is what we believe. Irresistible means, you can't say no.

Grace — unmerited favor. God looking down and not noticing the one that will accept and then being gracious, but God being gracious because He chooses to be gracious. Irresistible grace. I'm reading again from Spencer's little book on Tulip. The fourth point of Calvinism counters the fourth point of Arminianism. With irresistible grace versus obstructable grace. You may not have heard that term. In our circle, you don't hear about *obstructable* grace. But you hear about irresistible grace. Well, the Arminian theory is that you can obstruct, resist, say "no" to grace. So God puts His grace down and we say, "no, don't want it." Okay, go ahead.

Now of course, as hard-headed Presbyterians, we say what you have just done is significant damage to the concept of the Sovereignty of God. As we look at creatures, we say that God is up here, then there is the devil, then humans are down here — in a third order. Well can the third order say no to the first order? If you believe in a Sovereign God, "no, I don't want it" — that's obstructable grace. You may try to give me your grace, Lord, but I don't want it, so I can say no. Irresistible grace is something else and that's what we believe, but it is based, we believe, on Scripture and the concept of the Sovereignty of God, and also the concept that we are totally depraved, hence, we don't have the good in us to reach out to God. It is He who worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure. That's old Presbyterian belief. Okay? Now, some verses to sort of back it up as we typically do:

2 Timothy 1:9 — "God has saved us, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began."

You may notice that I have used some of the same verses because they apply to all of the points here.

John 5:21 — "The Son quickeneth whom He will."

John 6:27 — "All that the Father giveth me, shall come to me. And him that cometh to me, I will no wise cast out."

Notice the originating force with God.

Daniel 4:35 — "He doeth according to His will in the army of Heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth and none can stay His hand."

If none can stay His hand, how can I obstruct His grace?

John 6:44 — "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me, draw him."

So, the Arminian struggles (in my opinion, with the opinion of many, of course of

the Reformed tradition), with this concept that God is Sovereign but He is not really omnipotent. If little ol me, from Kosciusko, MS can say no to God, He is not omnipotent. And I would hope that you would feel the same way too, if I have the ability to thwart the will of God, then how powerful is God. Okay, man is totally depraved. We've already talked about total depravity. I don't wish to honor God. As a matter of fact, I was reading one author, in preparation for this, who said, "Many a person goes to the mission field because they assume that there are millions of people out there longing to hear the Word of God and wishing to accept Christ as their Savior." And if we think that, we are not thinking in harmony with Scripture. We don't go out to these people craving God, we go out to announce the Gospel so that the elect might reach out because they have been enabled to reach out. That's how we believe. Now, that's sort of creates a little bit of a problem, now doesn't it?

This Arminian view: It is the will of God that all should be saved, but His will can be resisted since each person has the faculty of self-determination. Since God loves all people indiscriminately, He woos them with His Holy Spirit, seeking to draw them to faith in Christ. The external call of the Gospel is accompanied by universal, sufficient grace, but it will not be found irresistible to all men, but is obstructable by man's free will. That's the Arminian position. Now, by the way, don't get me wrong. They are Christian people who believe the Arminian position, okay? Some of my best friends are Arminians. One of my high school buddies was a guy named Morris Chapman, later President of the Southern Baptist Convention from Kosciusko — one of Adrian Rogers' right hand men. He would take this position. Now, we differ. But he is my Christian brother. As I like to say, not all of my cousins am I proud of. Not all of my cousins do you want to know. I think I told some of you about one of my cousins who had the fighting roosters — well, when we did his funeral, my older cousin Jan — so when he died, we had to drive by from the church on the way to the graveyard so that we could say goodbye to his roosters. Yea, it's illegal by the way, but he had to say goodbye to his roosters. I don't particularly want you to think of my family in terms of my rooster-fighting cousin. But he is still my cousin. He is still my cousin. So, they are my Christian brothers and I want my brothers and sisters to be my brothers and sisters, but I really want more than that to honor God as presented in His Word. That's what I really wish to do.

This irresistible grace, to read our position: Since it is the will of God that those whom He gave to His dear Son in eternity past, should be saved, He will surely act in Sovereign grace in such a way that the elect will find Christ irresistible. God does not force the elect to trust in His son, but rather, He gives them life. The dead human spirit finds the dead spirit of Satan irresistible. And all living human spirits find the God of the living irresistible. Regeneration — a work of God, must precede true repentance and faith. Ya'll have heard that from sermons from this pulpit for years and years and years. That is what we believe.

Daniel 4:35 — "Jehovah doth according to His will, in the army of heaven, and

among the inhabitants of the earth and none can stay His hand or say unto Him, 'what doest thou.'" I just read that one, okay? "My council shall stand. I will do all my pleasure" — Isaiah 46:10. Isaiah 55:11, "So shall My word be, it shall accomplish that which I please." And I know that verses can be given back to support the resistible position too, okay? But just — we're going to save that. Now, that's sort of a quick overview. I'm not trying to convince you of irresistible grace. I just want to state it. Because to me, we have two forces going on in the world today. One I'll spend more time on — the psychology part, but the theology part too. The Presbyterian church traces an awful lot of its history from what could be called the Scotch-Irish background/the Church of Scotland. And we thank the Lord for John Knox and granted, they were pretty dire, sour people over there. And my family was pretty much just like that. My family names are Black, McClellan, Thompson, and Elkin. Well, Elkin is sort of Welsh-ish, but that others are Scotch-Irish, okay? So this is my background, these folk.

Well, I started to talk with you just a little bit about the influence of Scotland. I would recommend, if you haven't read, as a good fun read, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*. I'm going to try to ask a favor. Anybody here read that book? You poor, ignorant people! I know you are reading the Bible and reading Calvin and all that stuff, but stir into the equation, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*. He gives you a quick little overview of the theology involved and it is only about yay-thick...it's not a biggie. But, he talks about how although a big hunk of the Calvinism or Reformed Faith that we have in this country came through Scotland. So also did the Enlightenment of Europe come through Scotland. They actually had professors over there at the University of Glasgow — one named Simpson, who believed that belief in Jesus as Savior was not necessary for salvation. That even that moral, upright pagans might be saved. He cast doubt on the Trinity and on Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Good grief. Our forbearers were struggling theologically — you know, couple of hundred years ago — three hundred years ago. So the struggle has started theologically. We see some of that same struggle in the world today with liberal Christianity in this country. So we've had this problem, okay? So that's been around. So as this theology was being talked about and struggled with, other things were taking place. I have to skip a lot of all of this mess because I don't want y'all to have to listen to it. But, I want to bring in the other tenant that I think is really a critical component of what is happening in the world today. Yes, we have liberal theology. We have a little bit of a rebirth of conservative theology taking place in the world, but what we really have in the world today is a world dominated by psychology. We really do. Everybody is influenced. Everything is influenced — more by psychology than we realize. And I'm just going to give you one illustration. How many of you have heard of the name, Abraham Maslow? Oh, there are a few educated people in here. Okay. Maslow is a humanistic thinker. Basically, doesn't believe in God. He is probably best remembered for a little thing that he gave us called a hierarchy of needs. Do you remember that little pyramid? That's exactly right. The hierarchy of needs — he says there are seven steps or needs that human beings have. The most basic need, the biggest

need, the one that has to be fulfilled, he calls our physiological needs. And you know what? He's right about that! If somebody cuts off your air, you've got a problem. If somebody cuts off your water, it will take a little bit longer, but you still have a problem. If someone cuts off your food, you can last longer, but it is still a problem. Our basic physiological needs are critically important. He says that's the number one need that humans have. Take a step up in his seven steps. Step number two, he calls a need for safety. We need to be safe. By the way, most of what he is talking about, I don't take exception to. I think we do have needs. But we'll get back to that in a second. So safety is a need. Third step he says, moving up, is our need for belongingness and love. Fourth step, we need our esteem needs met. Fifth, we need to be able to arrive at the level of self-actualization. Sixth, we have a need, a desire, to know and understand what is taking place around us. And a seventh need, the peak, is our need for aesthetic things in life — the quality, the good things of life.

Now, on one hand, I believe he is right. But the minute we start categorizing needs like this, we run into some problems. Most of us would agree that human beings, because the need for air, water, and food is so great, it is a cruel thing to withhold those from another person. We struggle when we start to withhold things from another person. I was there, my brother was there, when we voted not to put a feeding tube in my mother, knowing full well that if we didn't put a feeding tube in, she would die. She had Alzheimer's. Her body had forgotten how to swallow food. So when she tried to swallow, food would go in her lungs and in the stomach as well. And she was 89 years old, her quality of life was not good. Bless her heart, she didn't know where she was or what was going on. We can look at the medical ethics if you wish, but we were asked, "do you want to put a feeding tube in?" And we voted no. We withheld from her one of the physiological needs and in-so-doing, we voted for God to be in charge and for us not to be in charge and sustain her life artificially. That was the way we did it. You may take exception to it. There are different opinions. I understand that, okay? I believe you should put a feeding tube in if there is legitimate hope for the person to get better. I believe in a respirator if there is legitimate hope that the person will get better. And there are other situations that I am not smart enough to know. That's why we leave it to physicians and medical ethics. I'm just telling you what we did. Her core physiological needs. But most of us would agree, see — there is almost a sense of entitlement to have those needs met. Every human being should have food, water, and air. And not to allow that is wrong.

Entitlement. Notice I started using a different word, now. From need, shift over to entitlement. And I'm going to tell you right now, I believe that's what has happened. Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been reinterpreted in our society as Maslow's hierarchy of entitlements.

Now, physiological needs, yes. Safety - well. We don't realize how this happened in our society. When my little brother was born — y'all know Bebo. When my little brother was born, my mother was in the hospital. We had just gotten a new

hospital in Kosciusko. When I was born, we didn't have one. When I was born, I was born at home. But when he was born, he was born in the hospital. My task everyday — we lived about three blocks from the hospital — was to put the fresh diapers in the basket of my bicycle and ride to the hospital and take the fresh diapers in. The hospital didn't provide diapers. How old was I? I was six years old. Riding my bicycle to the hospital, to deliver the fresh diapers, and I might add, to bring the dirty ones home. I rode faster coming home than I did going! I don't know if I could ever smell it or not — it might have been smart to ride slow. But anyway, I rode faster. It was downhill coming home, too.

Now, your child must wear a helmet. You are a bad parent if you let your child ride the bicycle or roller skate or skateboard or anything without a helmet. If your child goes rock climbing. We have a whole bunch of pictures from David and his family — they just got back from Colorado and the girls were doing rock climbing...they all had helmets on. Not only that, but guess what, there was no such thing as seat belts. I remember riding out on Granddaddy's house on the back end of a flat bed pick-up, bouncing almost off every time we hit a bump in the road. I had to lie down on my back to scoot back on the truck. My daddy was driving. Some would say he didn't like me. He loved me. But that was acceptable. You can't carry a child around in the back of a pick-up now. And you had better have them buckled in — it's the law. This safety is no longer a need. It is an entitlement. We must have safety. All the way from seatbelts to spanking. I have actually gone to court to testify for a Christian couple who spanked their child and accidentally bruised him a little bit—and they were not abusive parents. It was just one of those situations where the child tried to get away and the swinging — things happen. They about lost their child. Now, safety has become an entitlement. Food, water, air — yeah, entitlement. Safety? It has become more of an entitlement. Now we have — if you happen to live in Memphis, by the way, and we just got one in the mail here — you get a water quality report every so often. How many pine trees does it take to put out water quality reports? Well we get them all the time. We are entitled to good water. And then my wife wants to buy all that Dasani on top of that. That's a whole another deal.

Now, belongingness and love. Maslow's hierarchy says it's a need for belonging and love. What has our society done? If I have a greater sense of belongingness and love with someone of the same sex, who are you to tell me that I shouldn't have it, because I should be *entitled* to have belongingness and love if I wish it—with Harry. And who are you to tell me that I couldn't . I'm just telling you. Whether you feel yes or no on that, I'm telling you that the need of Maslow presented as belongingness and love has become an entitlement in our society. Who are you to say that somebody shouldn't — has become sort of a natural. Esteem. Let's use the term self-esteem. Remember, there are two ways in which we get self-esteem so the psychologist tell us. One is, you are declared to have value and worth. Therefore, every parent, every day, should tell their child, “you are the neatest thing I know — I am so glad I got to be your daddy. I am so glad I didn't get one of those ding-dongs down the street. You are so sweet. I love you

to death. I just love you.” Everyday your child needs to hear that. By the way, your spouse does too — that’s another whole deal. But, affirmation — the granting of value and worth.

The other one is, the earned value and worth. Now this is mine. If you don't like it, it's okay. But self-esteem is the function of an equation in terms of performance. The success that you have in the light of the expectation that you have, times the value that you put on what you are doing, determines how you feel about yourself. Put it in plain words. Suppose you study two weeks for an Algebra test and make a D. I'm sorry, but you are dumb. Suppose you study the night before and make an A. You are smart. That's the way our society thinks. Okay?

Success over effort. Now let's suppose you study two weeks and make an A, but it's in basket weaving. You don't really feel that good about yourself, do you? I don't care if you make an A in basket weaving or not, you don't just feel really pumped up about that. The value that you put on what you do — this is a performance part of our self-esteem. So what we need to have here is affirmation and declaration of value, but I need to have some way to do something, too. Notice God, in His wisdom, declares us righteous with justification but urges us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling in sanctification. He wants us to buffet our bodies and run with patience, the race that is set before us and lay aside every weight that besets us. Justification, He declares. Sanctification, we try to cooperate with the Spirit working within us to want that. So, self-esteem is a function of declaration and participation in some sense. Okay. In our society today, it appears that we have done away with part two of the equation. Everybody needs to be told how wonderful they are, whether they are or not. And I use the same old illustration — so every kid on the swim team gets a trophy. It doesn't matter whether they flake out or not. When we were living in Memphis, my sweet little baby daughter, was on the swim team out at Hanging Moss, and I remember going to a swim meet one time, and bless her heart, and my mother happened to be. The gun sounded and she jumped off and she was tearing like she was with a Maserati and my mother said, “Oh my goodness, she is going to win!” And I said, “Wait a minute Momma, just wait a minute, wait a minute.” She got half-way down and stopped. She couldn't breathe. As long as she could swing her arms, she was fast, but when she had to breathe, she had to stop. Everybody passed her. Guess what? She got a trophy. Now, the trophy — well, you get the general picture, right?

So what we are saying here is, esteem — when esteem is declared humanly speaking, forget the God part for the moment. When humanly speaking we declare everybody everywhere to be equal and deserving of the same thing no matter what, we do away with any striving or personal trying. And we say that people are entitled to esteem whether they perform or not. Got a problem! Got a real problem!

Now, self-actualization. If self-actualization is an entitlement, what if I think that

self-actualization is making a billion dollars? Suppose my last name is Madoff. There is a problem here. But, if I am entitled to self-actualization. If I am entitled to being all that I wish to be, then why shouldn't I — there actually isn't a right and wrong anyway. It's actually a question of what I can get away with. My point is, that needs which I think are somewhat legitimate — and once we start enabling so that entitlement becomes the issue, we got us a problem. I need to give you a couple of illustrations here. I have a friend in Memphis that owns about forty homes that he rents. He's not a wealthy guy. But, he's got these houses based on the equity of the house and then he rents those houses to individual families that the government guarantees the rent for. He's got guaranteed income. That happens. You may not realize it, but it does happen. But one that bothers me even more. I got an email from a friend who talks about cell phones and everybody owning cell phones. My friend didn't realize that there is a government program, that if you are below the poverty line, the government will buy you a cell phone. Now, if I am entitled to a house and a cell phone, where is the line where entitlement stops and needs begin. I'm saying that in my opinion in our society, the entitlement concept is taken over. Now, I remember when I was a student from Belhaven, right up the street. I was very fortunate to be part of the Westminster Fellowship there, and I got to be on the leadership team at Westminster Fellowship and I remember, oh, at least three times—I didn't the first year but I did every year after that—I went and visited Mr. Kennington. Mr. Kennington was a dear, sweet person, especially to Belhaven and especially to Belhaven students. We would plan our missions trip every year to Rock Eagle over in Georgia. And we would go in and he would ask how much we were going to need and what it was it going to cost for the bus and what were you going to do...and he would ask us to account for what we were going to do. And inevitably, that dear sweet person would give us money. And we would get on the Greyhound bus — one year, I had a cousin who drove it — I have cousins who do everything — one of my cousins drove the Greyhound. So, we went to Rock Eagle and I used to like to get in the bin up top and sleep up there. You know? That was before I had a girlfriend. I didn't want to get up there after I had a girlfriend. That's Mary by the way. But anyway, we would go to Rock Eagle. What would have happened if I had walked in and said, "Mr. Kennington, we are not going to be able to get away because of exams this year and everything going on, so we've decided to rent an airplane. We need a thousand dollars from you this year. What do you think would have happened? I don't know because I never thought about doing that. Never crossed my mind.

As needs are re-interpreted as entitlements, we begin to have a problem. Now the problem gets really sort of tricky here. Reading to you from Canadian Internal Development Agency position paper: "the day will come when the progress of nations will be judged, not by their military or economic strength nor by the splendor of their capitol cities and public buildings (which I agree with, by the way) but by the well-being of their people, by the levels of health, nutrition, and education, by their opportunities to earn a fair reward for their labors, by their abilities to participate in the decisions that effect their lives, by the respect that is

shown for their civil and political liberties, by the provision that is made by those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged and by the protection that is afforded to the growing lives and bodies of their children.” I personally think that is wonderful. I like what I read there. But at what point does entitlement come into play. At what point? See, in my opinion, as we shift from need to entitlement, the more we shift to entitlement, the less respect we have for grace. Grace is unmerited favor. Grace is “I am a sinner, Lord.” You could burn me up in hell right now and be justified in-so-doing. My heart is evil and deceitful above all things and nobody can know it. Men can look on the outward appearance but you look on the heart. I deserve eternal damnation. That's our theology. The more we cloud needs with entitlement — and by the way, in case you think that I am thinking about social issues, I'm not. I am talking about Christian people. I am talking about those who believe, who begin to think in terms of entitlements. Who begin to think that hell shouldn't be preached about. That we should be more gentle — we should try to persuade people to become Christians. God changes hearts, we don't. Grace is unmerited favor. It implies that we have a core need for that grace and without it, we are nothing. Needs as Maslow described them, have a hierarchical effect — the bottom ones are necessities, the top ones are luxuries. But the minute we start making all of his hierarchies to be necessities, we have us a problem. So that entitlement comes. Thus, irresistible grace versus obstructable grace is not really the question to most people today. The question is, how important is grace period? Without grace as a major theme, guess what? We begin to think in terms of all people being Christians. All people deserving Heaven. I'm sorry but when he is twenty-four years old, I have no trouble thinking of him going to hell, but when he's 84 years old and broken, how could God turn His back on him? See. Well, God can turn His back on him because He is a sinner. That's the bottom line. In today's world, the modern man struggles with Reformed Theology because we believe in grace. We believe in unmerited favor. We believe that we don't deserve any good thing that comes. Hence, every Sunday in this sermon in prayer, in preaching, or in song, you will hear something about we're broken, we're sinners, and we don't deserve. That's a core part of our belief. At the same time, we live in a world that is promoting more and more, the concept that there is an entitlement, and how could God reject us, if He is a God of love. Because He is also a God of justice, that's how. We need to understand what's taking place in the world around us.

Let's pray...

Heavenly Father, You are so good and You are so gracious. You allow us Your Word, You let us think, You let us endure, You give us love, You give us compassion, but so often, Lord, we assume that we know more than You have told us. We assume that You are obligated in some way to human beings. There is not a person on the face of this earth who holds any obligatory relationship from You. You are the only perfect, Sovereign being. We are creatures and we are sinners. Lord, please keep us from looking at other people and judging them. Help us to understand though, the world in which we live, the waters in which we

swim, the theology in which we believe, the Scriptures which you have given. And in-so-doing, may we be Your people. Grant us Your grace. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

Stand please. Please receive God's benediction.

May grace, mercy and peace, from the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, rest and abide upon each of you, both now and forevermore, Amen.

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