

## I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to Neighborhood. I'm always grateful for each one who chooses to worship with us and to study God's Word with us.
- B. Scriptures:
  - 1. *To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. (Revelation 3:21)*
  - 2. *For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:17)*

## II. Stories

- A. A man sits behind bars, locked up for many years to come. His horrendous crime haunts him. His soul replays it in his dreams. His mind is clouded every waking hour. His conscience strikes him with guilt. But he shakes it off. He tells himself what he has always told himself. He repeats the only message that makes him feel better about himself. The man says, "I am a victim of my circumstances. I couldn't help myself."
- B. A woman and man share a drink after work. They know their families are waiting for them to come home, but they just have to celebrate. They have just landed a huge account, something they have worked for months to get. Now, it's time to unwind. It's time to party. A few hours later, the man has a sparkle in his eyes, and the woman has a gleam in hers, and they find themselves in a cab going home together. The next day, they tell themselves, "One thing led to another. We couldn't help ourselves."
- C. A woman stares out the window with a blank expression on her face. Her children sit on the sofa behind her. They are crying. Again. She has vented her rage on them yet again. She feels horrible. A thousand times she has promised God she would never go off on them like that again. And a thousand times, she has failed. "I have a bad temper," she tells herself. "It's in my DNA. I can't help myself."

## III. Illusions

- A. My talk today is Part Two in our Fall series. The series is called Illusions. An illusion is something you believe is true, but it isn't true. The big idea is simple and radical too. Our big idea is that the philosophies that guide the societies of the world are built on illusions. Falsehoods. Fallacies. Lies. Deceptions. Jesus described these world-philosophies as shifting sand. You just can't build a stable life upon them.
- B. Last time, we talked about the first illusion called Humanism.
- C. Today, our topic is a second illusion called Determinism.
- D. Every time any person says or thinks or believes "I can't help myself," they are expressing Determinism. In its extreme form, determinism says that everything in life is predetermined.
  - 1. It sounds like this:
    - a) *"I am a determinist. I basically believe that at any one point in time it is completely the configuration of molecules in the universe and in particular in your brain that mandates what you do and that you could not have done anything other than what you did. In other words, you don't have any choices. You think you do, and it looks like you do, but you don't really."*
    - (1) *[Dr. Jerry Coyne is a Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Chicago. He writes frequently for the New York Times and USA Today.]*
  - 2. It is completely the configuration of molecules in the universe and in your brain. That is what controls everything. It is determined by biology. By science. By energy. By random chemical reactions.
  - 3. Most people aren't as extreme as this. But still, it's something we need to think through.
- E. Because determinism has infected so much of what the world just assumes is true today. And it is wrong, and depressing, and makes us limp beneath our dignity as royal children of God.
- F. Three questions about Determinism.
  - 1. What is determinism?
  - 2. What are some main beliefs of determinism?
  - 3. What can Christians say to our deterministic friends?

## IV. Three Questions about Determinism

- A. *What is determinism?*
  - 1. *DETERMINISM is a philosophy of life in which everything in our lives and in our world is governed by physical laws of cause and effect, so that free will is only an illusion.*
  - 2. Everything is caused by something else. Every relationship. Every emotion. Every belief. Every action. Everything is a chain of cause and effect. Your prayers. Your beliefs. Your loves.
  - 3. These are not your choices.
  - 4. These are not your beliefs.
  - 5. Not your passions or your dreams.
  - 6. These are nothing but the outworking of biological imperatives, and the physics of molecules and energy interacting in your brain.
  - 7. Getting married. Having children. Caring for aging parents. Generosity. Kindness. Love. It's all nothing but long, complicated, linked chains of cause and effect.
  - 8. And in that chain, YOU are no more or less important than any other link. You are just another part of the giant chemical machine called the universe.
  - 9. You are a puppet, and other forces are pulling the strings.
  - 10. Determinism has a little sister called Fatalism.
  - 11. *FATALISM is the belief that we're stuck with what will be will be, since all events, past, present, and future, are determined by causes beyond our ability to influence.*

12. Greek mythology depicted three sister goddesses called the Fates. They were blind, and ugly, and ancient. For every life, and every being, the Fates spun a thread. One sister spun the thread of life. One sister determined how long the thread should go. And one sister, when the time was right, cut the thread with her shears, and that was the end.
13. The fates were even stronger than the gods, because nobody can escape the Fates.
14. You might laugh at that today, but fatalism and determinism are nasty viruses that have infected so much of what most people believe today.

B. *What are some key beliefs of Determinism?*

1. *MATERIALISM. Everything is a bunch of chemical ping pong balls bouncing around in an energy soup.*
  - a) There is matter.
  - b) There is energy.
  - c) There is matter and energy together plus nothing. Every idea, every belief, and every love is a chemical reaction. The intimate motions of human relationships, and the cosmic motions of galaxies and stars are all the same.
  - d) The cosmos is all that is, or was, or ever will be. And it is nothing other than matter interacting with energy.
  - e) So... the only major difference between a rock and a light bulb and a dog and a boy is how complicated of a chemistry set we are. Otherwise, we're all the same thing, and the only thing that divides us is where we land on the spectrum of complexity.
  - f) Life is not sacred.
  - g) God is not real. No miracles. No angels. No demons. No heaven. No hell.
  - h) Love is a chemistry experiment.
  - i) Life is an accident.
  - j) Existence is absurd.
  - k) And the destiny of everything is the slow-motion death of thermodynamic equalization when the cosmos burns all its fuel.
    - (1) Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.
2. *NO FREE WILL. Free will and human choice are simply an illusion.*
  - a) A very famous philosopher said,
    - (1) Baruch Spinoza "In the mind there is no absolute or free will; but the mind is determined to wish this or that by a cause, which has also been determined by another cause, and this last by another cause, and so on to infinity."
  - b) There's that chain of cause and effect.
  - c) Today, you came to church. Online. On video. In person. You came to church. Other people did not go to church. They stayed home.
    - (1) You made a choice.
    - (2) They made a choice.
  - d) All those choices are illusions. If determinism is true, the actual reason you came to church is because you were shoved here by cause and effect chains that started a million years ago.
  - e) And the same holds for people who didn't come to church today.
  - f) A few years ago, I asked Margi to marry me. It was a couple of weeks before Christmas.
  - g) I bought a diamond ring, and put it on an ornament, and hung it on the Christmas tree. On the big proposal night, I asked her to find that particular ornament. When she did, she saw the sparkly diamond ring. Her eyes got big. Her body shuddered. And she froze. I took that as a good sign.
  - h) She didn't even notice me sneak up behind her, and broken-foot and all, get down on one knee.
  - i) And I asked her to marry me. And she got kind of blubbery and nodded her head. And I asked if that meant yes, and she squeaked out a yes.
  - j) So I slipped a diamond on her finger.
  - k) I chose her.
  - l) And she chose me.
  - m) And many here are married or you have been married. And you chose each other.
  - n) But, actually you didn't, if determinism is true. The molecules in the test tube of your brain were shoved in a certain direction, and cause-and-effect created a million year old daisy chain, and there was absolutely no genuine choice here. I couldn't do anything BUT propose to Margi, and she couldn't do anything BUT say yes.
  - o) It was all determined, because free will is just an illusion.
  - p) Fifteen years ago, determinism sent Margi and me from Chicago to Redding, CA. Determinism sent you to Neighborhood Church. Determinism selects our presidents, decides our weather, strikes us with diseases, and decides who will win the World Series.
  - q) No choice. No goals. No dreams. No striving for what you believe in. No defeat if you blow it. No victory if you overcome.
  - r) Just the random chance of molecular ping pong and impersonal cosmic forces playing a game with the machinery of the universe, and we're all part of the game.
  - s) It's all just a dream.
  - t) And vanity.
  - u) And chasing the wind.
    - (1) How's your day going?
3. *FLAVORS. Determinism comes in a whole lot of flavors.*
  - a) *SUPERSTITIOUS DETERMINISM. I am at the mercy of luck, the stars, my horoscope, curses, and, oops, I broke a mirror.*
    - (1) Christians don't believe in being lucky or unlucky. Luck is named after the Norse God Loki, yes, Thor's brother. He was always tricky and always causing trouble.

- (2) The Bible is also clear that a curse has no power over your life.
  - (3) We believe our lives are in the hand of a caring and powerful Father in heaven, and he has a name, and he knows his children by name.
  - (4) It's not bad luck that determines your life.
  - (5) It's not a generational curse that determines your life.
  - (6) It's not karma, or fate, or the evil eye, or angry saints, that determine your life.
  - (7) You can't even say the devil made me do it.
  - (8) No.
  - (9) Your life sits in the hands of your gracious heavenly father, who loves you, and opens doors of opportunity and grace that no one can shut.
  - (10) What are you waiting for?
- b) **GENETIC DETERMINISM.** *I only do what I am genetically programmed to do.*
- (1) Why do sharks attack? Sharks attack because that is what they are genetically programmed to do, and too bad for Dory.
  - (2) A criminal pulls the trigger because that is what a criminal is programmed to do. An abuser raises his fist because that is what an abuser is programmed to do.
  - (3) Or you can flip it over.
  - (4) A hero isn't a hero by choice.
  - (5) People who do what is good and right—that's not a choice either. It's all determined by the genetic cards they were dealt at conception.
- c) **FAMILY TREE DETERMINISM.** *"My grandpa was a drunk, my dad was a drunk, I'll be a drunk, and my kid will be a drunk."*
- (1) *The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (Ezekiel 18:20)*
  - (2) Your family tree does not define you. That is an illusion.
  - (3) You may have come from a long line of criminals, addicts, and evil doers. You get to uproot that family tree and plant a new one.
  - (4) If you come from a really messed up family tree, I have a suggestion for you. Spend some time in prayer, and tell God that you believe that you are not the same as those people.
  - (5) Claim this scripture as your own:
    - (a) I have received the gift of righteousness.
    - (b) I have received the abundance of grace.
    - (c) I therefore reign in life, through Jesus Christ, my king.
    - (d) By the grace of God I will overcome!
  - (6) And I promise you, that if your father or if your mother were in their right mind for even a second, they would look you in the eye and say, I'm proud of you.
    - (a) And even if that never happens, when you take your power back, when you reject the determinism of the world, when you look to heaven and say that Christ has redeemed you and you're free, you should know your Father in heaven is more proud of you than you realize.
- d) **SOCIAL DETERMINISM.** *I am defined by my caste, tribe, group, or economic status, and I can't ever change it.*
- (1) Jesus Christ didn't die on the Cross to leave you where he found you.
  - (2) Determinism offers no reason to resist evil. No reason to pursue justice. It's all determined... why fight it? Why fight anything? Just Zen out, and go with the flow.
  - (3) If you're born low caste, or low class, just accept it.
  - (4) Jesus said no to the social determinism of his day. He embraced lepers. He loved the outcasts. He forgave sinners. His disciples taught...
    - (a) *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28, NKJV).*
  - (5) They may imprison the body of a child of God, but you don't have to let them imprison your spirit.
- e) **THEOLOGICAL DETERMINISM.** *God decides everything that happens, and even our choices have been pre-decided by him.*
- (1) The word theological simply means having to do with the study of God.
  - (2) This one is tricky, because we do believe that God is sovereign. He is the caring and powerful ruler of our lives and our world. God sits on the throne of the cosmos. He rules. He reigns. He does his will. He does that which pleases him. No one can defy him and make it stick.
  - (3) His sovereignty is infinite. His sovereignty is perfect. His sovereignty is glorious. God's will remains supreme.
  - (4) Now, there are some theological systems that say God is so sovereign that humans have no free will. Or if we do have free will, every decision was pre-ordained by God. Or else free will is just an illusion, and God is the ultimate actor in everything.
  - (5) I don't believe that, for many reasons. I did preach on this when we went verse-by-verse through Romans, so I won't repeat that.
  - (6) I will just remind you of the verses we started with today:
    - (a) *To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. (Revelation 3:21)*
      - (1) The sovereign God sits in power on his throne, but notice who else sits there too. The one who overcomes. Who is that? It is you if you grow mature enough as a Christian to use the power that has been given you.

(2) This verse is affirming the infinite sovereignty of God, AND at the same time, teaching the finite sovereignty of the child of God.

(3) You have the same thing in Romans 5:17:

- (b) *For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:17)*
- i) This verse says that certain people reign in life. Who? Those who have received the abundance of grace... who's that? Every single Christian.
  - ii) And those who have received the gift of righteousness.. who's that? Every single Christian.
  - iii) Every single Christian is designed by God to reign in life.
  - iv) That means you sit on the throne of your life, you are spiritual royalty. That means your decisions stick. They are not predetermined by God. You are not stuck on predestinated train tracks.
  - v) You have freedom. You have authority. You have the power to choose your course.
  - vi) It's not train tracks, it's a wide open field and you have a heavenly dirt bike. Go tear it up.
- (c) You are created in the image of God. When he made you, he put a few drops of sovereignty into the recipe.
- (d) God is sovereign. By his grace, you are a mini-sovereign.
- (e) You are not his puppet, and he is not pulling your strings. That is an illusion. Don't fall for it. Reject it.
- (f) And the day you stop saying, God made me do it, and I can't help myself, and the devil made me do it... and the day you start saying, I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength, that is the day the shackles of determinism crumble into a million pieces into so much dust around your feet.

C. 3. What can we say to our deterministic friends?

1. *I agree that we all have some things that we cannot change, but the most important things about me lie WITHIN MY POWER TO CHANGE.*
  - a) I can't change where I was born. I can't change the family I was born into. I can't change my genetic code. I can't change my history.
  - b) There are a whole lot of unchangeables in my life. Maturity means that you accept the unchangeables with dignity and grace, and move on with your life to change what can be changed.
  - c) You are not a molecular machine.
  - d) You are a body, soul, and spirit, created with a divine spark, and destined for the glories of heaven.
    - (1) You can rise above the dysfunction of your past. Yeah, your family gave you a shove in a horrible direction... but by the grace of God you can turn around, and change directions.
    - (2) You can rise above your heartbreaks. You can rise above your losses. You can rise above your habits. You can rise above your addictions. You can rise above your lusts. You can rise above your depression. You can rise above your bitterness. You can rise above your anger. You can rise above your labels. You can rise above your lies.
  - e) You can kick the devil in the teeth, take back your life, and rise to your breathtaking potential as a child of God.
    - (1) *Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. (Romans 8:37, NKJV).*
  - f) I can't control everything, but the things I can control, I will control, and by God's grace, I will overcome.
2. *I agree that circumstances have power over our lives, but they never become an EXCUSE TO REMAIN IN DEFEAT.*
  - a) Determinism is a philosophy of excuses. You can't be blamed for anything you do. You have a built-in excuse for everything. I can't help myself.
  - b) Determinism always leads to fatalism, and fatalism is always the little voice in your head that whispers, I AM A VICTIM. I am a victim. I am a victim.
  - c) The determinist says, "Judges shouldn't be so quick to send criminals to jail, because criminal behavior is genetically controlled. He can't help that he was born with a criminal gene. It's determined."
  - d) I would say, well then it's determined that a judge would send the criminal to jail. They can't help themselves.
    - (1) The first nobility of the human spirit is that you rise above your animal instincts. You control them. You harness them for good.
    - (2) The second nobility of the human spirit is that you rule and reign in your life under the mighty Lordship of Jesus Christ.
    - (3) The third nobility of the human spirit is to take one hundred percent responsibility for the quality of your life under grace.
  - e) No excuses. No quitting. No whining. No feeling sorry for yourself.
  - f) The wide open promised land of God's blessing and grace stretches to the horizon before you. It belongs to you. God says, go up and take it. Possess your possessions. Be the person you were meant to be. Rise up. Be free.
3. *I agree that a complex sequence of events led you to this conversation, so why not DECLARE YOUR FAITH IN JESUS and see what happens?*
  - a) Why not?
  - b) If salvation isn't "determined," it's not going to stick anyway, so why not give Jesus a try?
  - c) There's nothing to lose and everything to gain.
  - d) If you're right about determinism, then you hearing these words today is determined. And your response to them is determined. And your faith in Christ is determined... so why would you resist him today?
  - e) The choice is yours:
    - (1) *And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. (Revelation 22:17, NKJV).*