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THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

by Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Contents

Argument 1:	The universal guilt of mankind proves “free will” to be false	2
Argument 2:	The universal rule of sin proves “free will” to be false.....	3
Argument 3:	“Free will” is not able to gain acceptance with God through keeping the Moral and Ceremonial Law.....	4
Argument 4:	The Law is designed to lead men to Christ by giving a knowledge of sin.....	5
Argument 5:	The doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ proves “free will” to be false	5
Argument 6:	There is no place for any idea of merit or reward.....	6
Argument 7:	“Free will” has no value because works have nothing to do with a man’s righteousness before God	7
Argument 8:	A whole fistful of arguments.....	7
Argument 9:	Paul is absolutely clear in refuting “free will”	7
Argument 10:	The state of man without the Spirit shows “free will” can do nothing spiritual	7
Argument 11:	Those who come to know Christ did not previously think about Him or prepare themselves for Him	8
Argument 12:	Salvation for a sinful world is by the grace of Christ through faith alone	8
Argument 13:	The case of Nicodemus in John 3 opposes “free will”	9

Argument 14: “Free will” is useless: salvation is by Christ alone 9

Argument 15: Man is unable to believe the Gospel, so all his efforts cannot save him..... 10

Argument 16: Universal unbelief proves “free will” to be false..... 10

Argument 17: The power of the “flesh” in true believers disproves “free will” 10

Argument 18: Knowing that salvation does not depend on “free will” can be very comforting..... 11

Argument 19: God’s honor cannot be tarnished..... 11

Appendix: Some of the 22 Titles Available in Print the Great Christian Classic Series *last page*

This material first appeared as Section VII in *The Bondage of the Will*. This text is excerpted from chapter one of *Born Slaves*, an abridged version in modern English of Martin Luther’s *The Bondage of the Will* (first published in 1525). Clifford Pond prepared *Born Slaves* (ISBN 978 0 946462 02 5), adding a helpful Introduction, Preface, and Postscript, which set the work in its historical context. *Born Slaves* is one of a series of twenty-two condensed classics published by Grace Publications Trust. These are available through most Christian bookstores or by contacting the distributor:

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THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

“What the Scriptures Teach”

THE Scriptures are like several armies opposed to the idea that man has a “free will” to choose and receive salvation. But it will be enough for me to bring two generals into the fight—Paul and John, with a few of their forces.

Argument 1: The universal guilt of mankind proves “free will” to be false.

For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. (Rom 1:17-19)

In Romans 1:18, Paul teaches that all men without exception deserve to be punished by God: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.” If all men have “free will” and yet all without exception are under God’s wrath, then it follows that “free will” leads them in only one direction—“ungodliness and unrighteousness” (i.e., wickedness). So where is the power of “free will” helping them to do good? If “free will” exists, it does not seem to be able to help men to salvation because it still leaves them under the wrath of God.

But some people accuse me of not following Paul closely enough. They claim that Paul’s words “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness” do not mean that everyone without exception is guilty in God’s sight. They argue that the text leaves it possible that some people do not

“hold the truth in unrighteousness,” i.e., to suppress the truth by their wickedness. But Paul is using a Hebrew form of words which leaves no doubt that he means the wickedness of all men.

Furthermore, notice what Paul wrote just before it. In verse 16, Paul declares the Gospel to be “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.” This must mean that apart from the power of God in the Gospel, no one has strength on his own to turn to God. Paul goes on to say that this applies both to the Jews and to the Greeks. The Jews knew the laws of God in minute detail, but this did not save them from God’s wrath. The Greeks enjoyed wonderful cultural benefits, but these brought them no nearer to God. There were Jews and Greeks who tried hard to make themselves right with God. But in spite of all their advantages and their “free will,” they failed completely. Paul does not hesitate to condemn them all.

Then notice that in verse 17, Paul says that “the righteousness of God” is revealed. So God shows His righteousness to men. But God is not foolish. If men did not need God’s help, He would not waste His time giving it to them. Every time people are converted, it is because God has come to them and overcome their ignorance by showing the Gospel to them. Without this, they could never save themselves. No one in all human history has thought out by himself the fact of God’s wrath as it is taught in Scripture. No one ever dreamed of getting peace with God through the life and work of a unique Savior, the God-man, Jesus Christ. In fact, the Jews rejected Christ in spite of all the teaching of their prophets. It seems that the very goodness that some Jews and Gentiles reached stopped them from seeking God in His way—because they were determined to do things in their own way. So, the more “free will” tries, the worse things become!

There is not a third group of people somewhere in between believers and unbelievers: a group capable of saving themselves. Jews and Gentiles make up the whole of mankind, and they are all under God’s wrath. None has the ability to turn to God. He must show Himself to them first. If it were possible by “free will” to discover the truth, surely one Jew somewhere would have done so! The very highest reasonings of the Gentiles and the very strongest efforts of the best of the Jews did not bring them anywhere near to faith in Christ (Rom 1:21; 2:23, 28-29). They were condemned sinners along with all the rest. If all men have a “free will” and all men are guilty and condemned, then this supposed “free will” is powerless to bring them to faith in Christ. So, their will is not free after all.

Argument 2: The universal rule of sin proves “free will” to be false.

What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God. (Rom 3:9-25)

We must let Paul explain his own teaching. In Romans 3:9, he says, “What then? are we [Jews] better than they [Gentiles]? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin.” Not only are all men without exception declared to be guilty in God’s sight, they are slaves to the sin that makes them guilty. This includes the Jews, who thought they were not slaves of sin because they had the Law of God. Since neither Jews nor Gentiles have been able to rid themselves of this slavery, there is obviously no power in man to help him to do good.

This universal slavery to sin includes those who appear to be the best and most upright. No matter how much goodness men may naturally achieve, this is not the same thing as the knowledge of God. The most excellent thing about men is their reason and their will, but it has to be acknowledged that this noblest part is *corrupt*. Paul says in Romans 3:10-12, “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” The meaning of these words is perfectly clear. It is in the reason and the will that God is known. But no one *by nature* knows God. We must conclude therefore that man’s will is corrupt and man is *totally unable* by himself to know God or to please Him.

Perhaps some brave individual will say that we are able to do more than we actually perform. But we are concerned here with what we are able to do, not with what we may or may not actually do. The Scriptures quoted by Paul in Romans 3:10-12 will not allow us to make such a distinction. God condemns both the sinful inability of men as well as their corrupt acts. If men were able in the slightest degree to try to move in God’s direction, there would be no need for God to save them. He would allow them to save themselves. But no man is able even to attempt it!

In Romans 3:19, Paul declares that every mouth is to be shut tight because no one may argue against God’s judgment of them; for there is nothing in anyone that God can praise—not even a will that is free to turn to Him. If someone says, “I do have a little ability of my own to turn to God,” that must mean he thinks there is something in him that God must praise and not condemn. His mouth is not shut! But this contradicts Scripture.

God has said that *all* mouths are shut. It is not just certain groups of people who are guilty before God. It is not just the Pharisees among the Jews who are condemned. If this were so, then the remaining Jews would have had some power of their own to keep the Law and avoid being guilty. But even the best of men are condemned for their ungodliness. They are spiritually dead in the same way as those who do not try to keep God’s Law at all. All men are ungodly and guilty, deserving to be punished by God. These things are so clear that no one can whisper a word against them!

Argument 3: “Free will” is not able to gain acceptance with God through keeping the Moral and Ceremonial Law.

Paul says in Romans 3:20, “by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight,” i.e., no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the Law. I argue that when he says this, he means the Moral Law (the Ten Commandments) as well as the Ceremonial Law. An idea has spread abroad that Paul means only the Ceremonial Law—the ritual of animal sacrifices and temple worship. It is extraordinary that men have called Jerome,¹ who invented this idea, a saint! I would call him something else! Jerome said that the death of Christ ended any possibility of being justified (declared righteous) by keeping the Ceremonial Law. But he left entirely open the possibility of being justified by keeping the Moral Law in our own strength, without God’s help.

My answer is that if Paul only meant the Ceremonial Law, his argument is meaningless. Paul is contending that all men are unrighteous and in need of God’s special grace—the love, wisdom, and power of God by which He saves us. The result of Jerome’s idea would be that God’s grace is needed to save us from Ceremonial Law but not from the Moral Law. But we cannot keep the Moral Law, apart from grace! You can scare people into keeping ceremonies, but no human power can force them to keep the Moral Law. Paul is arguing that we cannot be justified in God’s sight by trying to keep the Moral Law, or the Ceremonial Law. Eating, drinking, and such things in themselves neither justify nor condemn us.

I will go further and state that Paul means the whole law, and not any particular part of it, is still binding on men. If the Law was no longer binding on men because Christ died, all that Paul needed to do was to say so and nothing more. In Galatians 3:10, Paul wrote, “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” In this text, Paul claims support from Moses that the Law is binding on all men, and that failure to obey the Law puts all men under God’s curse.

Neither men who try to keep the Law, nor those who do not try to keep it, are justified before God, for they are all spiritually dead. Paul’s teaching is that there are two classes of people in the world—those who are spir-

¹ **Jerome** (ca. A.D. 347-420) – distinguished translator, exegete, and theologian of the early church; translated the Latin translation of Scripture known as the Vulgate.

itual and those who are not (see Romans 3:21 and 28). This is in harmony with the teaching of Jesus Christ in John 3:6: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” To people who do not have the Holy Spirit, the Law is useless. No matter how much they try to keep the Law, they will not be justified except by spiritual faith.

Finally, then, if there is such a thing as “free will,” it must be the noblest thing in a man, for without the Holy Spirit “free will” helps a man to keep the whole Law! But Paul says that those who are “of the works of the law” are not justified. This means that this “free will” at its best is unable to make men right with God. In fact, in Romans 3:20 Paul says that the Law is necessary to show us what sin is: “By the law is the knowledge of sin,” i.e., we become conscious of sin. Those who are “of the works of the law” cannot recognize what sin really is. The Law was not given to show men what they can do, but to correct their ideas of what right and wrong are in God’s sight. “Free will” is blind, for it needs to be taught by the Law. It is also powerless, for it fails to justify anyone in God’s sight.

Argument 4: The Law is designed to lead men to Christ by giving a knowledge of sin.

The argument in favor of “free will” is that the Law would not have been given if we were not able to obey it. Erasmus!² You repeatedly say, “If we can do nothing, what is the purpose of all the laws, precepts, threats, and promises?” The answer is that the Law was not given to show us what we can do. It was not even given to help us do what is right. Paul says in Romans 3:20, “by the law is the knowledge of sin.” The Law’s purpose is to show what sin is and what it leads to—death, hell, and the wrath of God. The Law can only point these things out. It cannot free us from them. Deliverance comes only through Jesus Christ, revealed to us in the Gospel! Neither reason nor “free will” can lead men to Christ, for reason and “free will” themselves need the light of the Law to show them their own sickness.

Paul asks this question in Galatians 3:19, “What then was the purpose of the law?” But Paul’s answer to his own question is the opposite of yours and Jerome’s. You say that the Law was given to prove the existence of “free will.” Jerome says that it was to restrain sin. But Paul does not say either of those things. His whole argument is that men need special grace to fight the evil that the Law exposes. There is no cure until the disease is diagnosed. The Law is necessary to make men see their dangerous condition, so they will long for the remedy that is found only in Christ! So Paul’s words in Romans 3:20 may seem to be very simple, but they have enough power to make “free will” utterly and completely non-existent. Paul says in Romans 7:7, “I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.” This means that “free will” does not even know what sin is! How then can “free will” ever know what is right? And if it does not know what is right, how can it strive to do what is right?

Argument 5: The doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ proves “free will” to be false.

In Romans 3:21-25, Paul confidently proclaims, “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.”

These words are thunderbolts against “free will.” Paul distinguishes the righteousness that God gives from a righteousness that comes from keeping the Law. “Free will” could only possibly flourish if man could be saved by keeping the Law. But Paul clearly demonstrates that we are saved without relying in any way on the works of the Law. No matter how much we might imagine a supposed “free will” would be able to do good works or make us

² **Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam** (1466?-1536) – Dutch Renaissance humanist and Roman Catholic theologian, recognized as the “Prince of the Humanists,” a leading biblical scholar, and a powerful advocate of church reform. Believing that all education must have the goal of training readers to understand Scripture, he prepared his own edition of the New Testament, published in 1516. Containing a Greek NT, a Latin translation, and annotations, this translation challenged Rome’s understanding of the Word and Rome’s doctrine. Some said in his day, “Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched” because his call for reform and his New Testament helped lay the foundation of the Reformation. Taking Rome’s side and holding firmly to the doctrine of free will, he wrote *On the Freedom of the Will* against Luther, who replied with *On the Bondage of the Will*. Erasmus’s later attempts to navigate the “middle road” between Rome and the Reformers disappointed and even angered many Protestants as well as conservative Catholics.

good citizens, Paul would still say that the righteousness that God gives is a different thing altogether. It is impossible for “free will” to survive the assault of verses like these.

These verses also fire another thunderbolt against “free will.” In them, Paul draws a line between believers and unbelievers (Rom 3:22). Nobody can deny that the supposed power of “free will” is quite different from faith in Jesus Christ. But without faith in Christ, Paul says nothing can be acceptable to God. And if a thing is not acceptable to God, it is sin. It cannot be neutral. Therefore, “free will,” if it exists, is *sin* because it is opposed to *faith*, and it gives no glory to God.

Romans 3:23 is another thunderbolt: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God!” Paul does not say, “All have sinned, except those who do good works by their own free will.” There are *no* exceptions. If it were possible to make ourselves acceptable to God by “free will,” then Paul is a liar—he ought to have allowed for exceptions. But he states clearly that because of sin, no one can truly glorify and please God. Anyone who does please God must know that God is pleased with him or her. But our experience teaches us that nothing in us pleases God. Ask those who argue for “free will” to say whether there is something in them that pleases God. They must admit that there is not. And Paul clearly says there is not.

Even those who believe in “free will” must agree with me that they cannot glorify God in their own strength. Even with their “free will,” they doubt whether they please God. So, I prove, on the testimony of their own conscience, that “free will” does not please God. Even with all its powers and efforts, “free will” is guilty of the sin of unbelief. So we see that the doctrine of *salvation by faith* is quite contrary to any idea of “free will.”

Argument 6: There is no place for any idea of merit or re-ward.

Those who teach “free will” say that if there is no “free will,” then there is no place for merit or reward.

What will the supporters of “free will” say about the word *freely* in Romans 3:24? Paul says that believers are “justified freely by his grace.” What do they make of “by his grace”? If salvation is free and given by grace, it cannot be earned or deserved. Yet Erasmus argues that a man must be able to do something to earn his salvation or he would not deserve to be saved. He thinks that the reason why God justifies one person and not another is because one used his “free will” and tried to be righteous, and the other did not. This makes God a respecter of persons—and the Bible says He is not (Acts 10:34). Erasmus and some other persons like him say that men can do only a very little with their own “free will” to get salvation. They say that “free will” only has a little merit—it does not deserve very much. But they still think that “free will” makes it possible for people to try to find God. And they still think that if people do not try to find God, it is their own fault if they do not receive His grace.

So whether this “free will” has great merit or little, the result is the same: the grace of God is earned by it. But Paul denies *all* merit when he says we are “freely” justified. Those who say that “free will” has only little merit are just as bad as those who say it has great merit. Both teach that “free will” has enough merit to secure the favor of God. So they are really no different from one another.

Actually, these supporters of “free will” have given us a perfect example of “jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.” By talking about “free will” only having little merit, they make their position worse, not better. At least those who talk about great merit (they are called “Pelagians”³) put a high price on God’s grace because great merit is needed to earn salvation. But Erasmus makes grace cheap. It can be obtained by a feeble effort. But Paul reduces both ideas to pulp by this one word “freely” in Romans 3:24.

Later, in Romans 11:6, he states that our acceptance with God is only by grace: “And if by grace, then is it no more of works...if it be of works, then is it no more grace.” Paul’s teaching is quite plain. There is no such thing as human merit in God’s sight, whether the merit is great or small. No one deserves to be saved. No one can work to be saved. Paul excludes all supposed works of “free will” and establishes grace alone. We cannot give ourselves even one tiny bit of credit for our salvation. It is entirely because of God’s grace.

³ **Pelagians** – a sect in the 4th and 5th centuries that followed the teachings of the heretic Pelagius (c. 354-c. 420), a British monk who argued that people could reform themselves by free will and that they can take the first steps toward salvation without the assistance of God’s grace. His views were condemned as heresy by the Council of Ephesus (431).

Argument 7: “Free will” has no value because works have nothing to do with a man’s righteousness before God.

For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. (Rom 4:2-5)

Now I will follow through with Paul’s arguments in Romans 4:2-3: “For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.” Paul does not deny that Abraham was a righteous man. The whole point is that this righteousness did not earn him salvation. No one disagrees that evil works are not acceptable to God. That is obvious. The argument is that not even good works make us acceptable to God. They merit His wrath, not His favor. In Romans 4:4-5, Paul sets “a man who works” over against “a man who does not work.” Righteousness, which is acceptance with God, is not accounted to “him who works,” but to “him who does not work” and—instead—trusts in God. There is no halfway position!

Argument 8: A whole fistful of arguments.

I must mention in passing some more arguments against “free will.” I will only refer to them briefly, but each of them by itself could completely destroy the idea of “free will.”

For example, the source of the grace by which we are saved is God’s eternal purpose (Rom 8:28ff.). This must rule out the suggestion that God is gracious to us because of something we may do.

Another argument is based on the fact that God promised salvation by grace (to Abraham) before He gave the Law. Paul argues that if we are now saved by keeping the Law by “free will,” then this would mean the promise of salvation by grace is cancelled (Rom 4:13-15; Gal 3:15-21). Faith, also, would have no value.

Paul also tells us that the Law can only expose sin; it cannot remove it (Gal 3:21ff.; Rom 3:20). Because “free will” can only operate on the basis of keeping the Law, there can be no righteousness acceptable to God achieved by it.

Lastly, we are all under God’s condemnation because of Adam’s sinful disobedience (Rom 5:12; 1Co 15:22). We all come under this condemnation at our birth, including those who have “free will”—if any such people exist! How then can “free will” help us—except to sin and earn condemnation?

I could have left out these arguments and simply given a running commentary on Paul’s writings. But I wanted to show just how stupid my opponents are, who fail to see such simple things plainly. I leave them to think over these arguments for themselves.

Argument 9: Paul is absolutely clear in refuting “free will.”

Paul’s arguments are so clear, it is amazing that anyone could misunderstand him. He says, “They are *all* gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is *none* that doeth good, no, not one” (Rom 3:12). I am amazed that some people say, “Some are not gone out of the way, are not unrighteous, are not evil, are not sinners; there is something in man that strives after good”! And Paul does not make these statements in a few isolated passages. He makes them sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, by plain statements and by contrasts. The plain meaning of his words, the whole context and the entire scope of his argument, unite in this—that apart from faith in Christ there is nothing but sin and condemnation. My opponents are defeated even if they will not surrender! But that is not in my power to bring about; I must leave that to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Argument 10: The state of man without the Spirit shows that “free will” can do nothing spiritual.

For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. (Rom 8:5-9)

In Romans 8:5, Paul divides mankind into two—those of the “flesh” (or the sinful nature), and those of the “Spirit” (see John 3:6). This can only mean that those who do not have the Spirit are in the flesh and still have a sinful nature. Paul says that “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he does not belong to Christ” (Rom 8:9). This obviously means that those without the Spirit belong to Satan. “Free will” has not been much good to them! Paul says that those controlled by their sinful nature “cannot please God” (Rom 8:8). He says that “the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom 8:7). It is impossible for such people to make any effort of their own to please God.

A man called Origen⁴ suggested that each man has a “soul” that has the ability to turn to the “flesh” or to the “Spirit.” This is just his imagination. He dreamt it! He has no Biblical proof for it at all. In fact, there is no middle position. Everything without the Spirit is flesh; and the best activities of the flesh are hostile to God. This is the same as the teaching of Christ in Matthew 7:18—that an evil tree cannot produce good fruit. It is also in harmony with the twin statements of Paul: “The just [righteous] shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17) and “whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). Those who are without faith are not justified, and those who are not justified are sinners in whom any supposed “free will” can only produce evil. So “free will” is nothing but a slave of sin, death, and Satan. Such “freedom” is no freedom at all.

Argument 11: Those who come to know Christ did not previously think about Him, seek Him, or prepare them-selves for Him.

In Romans 10:20, Paul quotes Isaiah 65:1: “I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not; I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name.” Paul knew from his own experience that he did not seek God’s grace, but received it in spite of his furious rage against it. Paul says in Romans 9:30-31 that the Jews who made great efforts to keep the Law were not saved by those efforts, but Gentiles who are totally ungodly received God’s mercy. This clearly shows that all the efforts of a man’s “free will” are useless to save him. The Jews’ zeal got them nowhere, while ungodly Gentiles received salvation! Grace is freely given to the undeserving and unworthy, and is not gained by any of the efforts that even the best and most upright of men try to make.

Argument 12: Salvation for a sinful world is by the grace of Christ through faith alone.

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me. And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. (Joh 1:10-16)

Let us now turn to John who also writes eloquently against “free will.” In John 1:5 he says, “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not,” and in John 1:10-11, “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” By “world,” John means the entire human race. Since “free will” would be a most excellent thing in man, it must be included in whatever John says about the “world.” Therefore, according to these two texts, “free will” does not know the light of truth and it hates Christ and his people. Many other passages, such as John 7:7; 8:23; 14:7; 15:19; 1 John 2:16; 5:19, proclaim that the “world” (and that especially includes “free will”) is under Satan’s command.

⁴ **Origen** (c.185-c.254) – Greek philosopher, theologian, and Biblical scholar in Alexandria, Egypt; his views were later condemned as unorthodox

The “world” includes all that is not separated to God by the Spirit. Now, if there had been anybody in the world who had by “free will” known the truth and by “free will” did not hate Christ, John would have altered what he wrote. But he did not do so. It is clear, therefore, that “free will” is as guilty as the “world.” In John 1:12-13, John goes on, “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” “Not of blood” means it is useless to rely on your place of birth, or on your family. “Nor of the will of the flesh” means it is foolish to rely on the “works of the law.” “Nor of the will of man” means that no effort by man can begin to make him acceptable to God.

If “free will” is useful at all, John ought not to reject “the will of the flesh,” or else he’s in danger of Isaiah 5:20: “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil.” There can be no doubt that natural birth is of no use to gain salvation because in Romans 9:8, Paul writes, “They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise.”

Then John also says in John 1:16, “And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace,” i.e., one blessing after another. So we receive spiritual blessings only through the grace of another and not by our own efforts. Two opposite things cannot both be true—that grace is so cheap, anyone anywhere can earn it; and at the same time, grace is so dear that we can only receive it through the merit of one man, Jesus Christ.

I wish my opponents would realize that when they argue for “free will,” they are denying Christ. If we can obtain grace by “free will,” we do not need Christ. And if we have Christ, we do not need “free will.” Supporters of “free will” prove their denial of Christ by their action because some of them even resort to the intercession of Mary and the “saints,” and fail to rely on Christ as the only mediator between man and God. They all abandon Christ in His work as Mediator and the kindest Savior—and regard the merits of Christ as of less value than their own efforts.

Argument 13: The case of Nicodemus in John 3 opposes “free will.”

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? (Joh 3:1-9)

Look at Nicodemus’ virtues in John 3:1-2. He confesses Christ to be true and to have come from God. He refers to Christ’s miracles. He seeks out Christ to hear more from Him. Now, when he hears of the new birth (3:3-8), does he admit that this is what he had sought in the past? No! He is startled and confused, and he turns away from it at first as an impossibility (3:9). Even the greatest philosophers have to admit that they do not know about Christ, much less can they seek those things that belong to salvation, before Christ came. When they admit that, they are admitting that their “free will” is ignorant and powerless! Surely, those who teach “free will” are crazy, but they will not keep quiet and give glory to God.

Argument 14: “Free will” is useless because salvation is by Christ alone.

It is clear from John 14:6, where Christ is said to be “the way, the truth and the life,” that salvation is to be found only in Jesus Christ. That being so, everything out of Christ can only be dark, false, and dead. What need would there be for Christ to come if men naturally understood the way to God, knew God’s truth, and shared God’s life?

Our opponents say that bad men have “free will,” even though they abuse it. If this is so, then there is something good in the worst of men. And if that is so, then God is unjust to condemn them. But John says that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are condemned already (Joh 3:18). But if men possess this good thing called

“free will,” then John ought to have said that they are condemned only because of their bad part, not because of this good part in them. Scripture says, “He that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (Joh 3:36). This must mean the whole of a man. If this were not so, then there would be a part in a man preventing him from being condemned—he could go on sinning without any fears, secure in the knowledge that he cannot be condemned.

Again, we read in John 3:27 that “a man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.” This refers especially to a man’s ability to do God’s will. Only what comes from above can help a man to do God’s will. But “free will” does not come from above, which means that “free will” is useless.

In John 3:31, John says, “He that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all.” Now, “free will” certainly has no heavenly origin. It is of the earth, and there is no other possibility. This can only mean, therefore, that “free will” has nothing to do with heavenly things. It can only be concerned with earthly things. Christ says in John 8:23, “You are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world.” If this statement only meant that their bodies were of the world, the statement would not be necessary; for they knew that already. Christ means that they were totally lacking in any spiritual power, and that this power could only come from God.

Argument 15: Man is unable to believe the Gospel, so all his efforts cannot save him.

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. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me. (Joh 6:44-45)

In John 6:44, Christ says, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” This leaves absolutely no room for “free will.” The Lord goes on to explain the Father’s drawing, “Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me” (verse 45). Man’s will, left to itself, is powerless to do anything about coming to Christ for salvation. Even the very word of the Gospel is heard in vain, unless the Father Himself speaks to the heart and draws us to Christ. Erasmus wants to play down the plain meaning of this text by likening men to sheep who respond to the shepherd when he holds out a branch to them. He argues that there is something in men that responds to the Gospel. But this will not do because even if God shows the gift of His own Son to ungodly men, they do not respond unless He works within them. Indeed, without the Father’s inward working, men are more likely to persecute His Son rather than follow Him. But, when the Father shows how wonderful His Son is to those to whom He has given understanding, then they are drawn to Him. Such people are already “sheep,” and they know the Shepherd’s voice!

Argument 16: Universal unbelief proves “free will” to be false.

And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me. (Joh 16:8-9)

In John 16:8, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will “reprove the world of sin,” i.e., He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin. In verse 9, He explains that the sin is “they believe not on me.” Now this sin of unbelief is not in the skin or in the hair, but in the mind and the will. All men without exception are as ignorant of the fact of their guilty unbelief as they are ignorant of Christ Himself. The guilt of unbelief has to be revealed to them by the Holy Spirit. So all that is in man, including “free will,” stands condemned by God and can only add to the guilt of which he is ignorant until God shows it to him. The whole of Scripture proclaims Christ as the only way of salvation. Anyone who is outside Christ is under the power of Satan, sin, death, and the wrath of God. Christ alone can rescue men from the kingdom of Satan. We are not delivered by any power within us, but only by the grace of God!

Argument 17: The power of the “flesh” in true believers dis-proves “free will.”

For some reason, Erasmus, you ignore my arguments from Romans 7 and Galatians 5. These two chapters show us that even in true Christian believers, the power of the “flesh” is such that they cannot do what they know they should do and want to do. Human nature is so bad, even in people who have the Spirit of God in

them, that not only do they fail to do what is right, but they even fight against it. What possibility can there be then that there is a power to do good in those who are not born again? As Paul says in Romans 8:7, “The carnal mind is enmity against⁵ God.” I would like to meet the man who can puncture that argument!

Argument 18: Knowing that salvation does not depend on “free will” can be very comforting.

I confess that I would not want “free will” even if it were given to me! If my salvation were left to me, I would be no match for all the dangers, difficulties, and devils that I have to fight. But even if there were no enemies to fight, I could never be certain of success. I would never be sure I had pleased God or whether there was something more I needed to do. I can prove this from my own painful experience over many years.⁶

But, my salvation is in God’s hands and not my own. He will be faithful to His promise to save me, not on the basis of what I do but according to His great mercy. God does not lie; He will not let my enemy the devil snatch me out of His hands. By “free will,” not one person can be saved. But by free grace, many *will* be saved. Not only so, but I am glad to know that as a Christian, I please God—not because of what I do but because of His grace. If I work too little or too badly, He graciously pardons me and makes me better. This is the glory of all Christians.

Argument 19: God’s honor cannot be tarnished.

You may be worried that it is hard to defend the honor of God in all this. “After all,” you might say, “He condemns those who cannot help being sinful, and who are forced to stay that way because God does not choose to save them.” As Paul says, we “were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (Eph 2:3). But you must look at it another way. God should be revered and respected as one Who is merciful to all He justifies and saves, although they are completely unworthy. We know God is divine. He is also wise and just. His justice is not the same as human justice. It is beyond our human understanding to grasp fully, as Paul exclaims in Romans 11:33, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!” If we agree that God’s nature, strength, wisdom, and knowledge are far above ours, we should also believe that His justice is greater and better than ours. He has promised us that when He reveals His glory to us, we will see clearly what we should believe now: that He is just, always was, and always will be (1Co 13:12).

Here is another example. If you use human reason to consider the way God rules the affairs of the world, you are forced to say either that there is no God or that God is unjust. The wicked prosper and the good suffer (*see* Job 12:6; Psalm 73:12)—and that appears to be unjust. So, many men deny the existence of God and say that everything happens by chance.

The answer to this problem is that there is life after this life, and all that is not punished and repaid here will be punished and repaid there. This life is nothing more than a preparation for, or rather, a beginning of the life that is to come. This problem has been debated in every age but is never solved, except by believing the Gospel as found in the Bible. Three lights shine on the problem: the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory. By the *light of nature*, God seems to be unjust, for the good suffer and the wicked prosper. The *light of grace* helps us further, but it does not explain how God can condemn someone who, by his own strength, can do nothing but sin and be guilty. Only the *light of glory* will explain this, on that coming Day when God will reveal Himself as a God Who is entirely just, although His judgment is beyond the understanding of human beings.⁷ A godly man believes that God foreknows and foreordains all things, and that nothing happens except by His will. No man, or angel, or any other creature, therefore, has a “free will.” Satan is the prince of this world and holds all men in bondage unless they are released by the power of the Holy Spirit.



⁵ **enmity against** – hostile to; the state of being an enemy.

⁶ Luther’s own conversion followed years of self-effort, fears, and confusion. See the tract *Luther’s Conversion* by Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), available from Chapel Library.

⁷ See the booklet *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* by J. I. Packer for further explanation; available from Chapel Library.

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