



## Lesson 5

# Conversion and the Will

### Worship

**Psalm 119:137-144** (spoken responsively by half-verse)

You are righteous, LORD,  
**and your laws are right.**  
The statutes you have laid down are righteous;  
**they are fully trustworthy.**  
My zeal wears me out,  
**for my enemies ignore your words.**  
Your promises have been thoroughly tested,  
**and your servant loves them.**  
Though I am lowly and despised,  
**I do not forget your precepts.**  
Your righteousness is everlasting  
**and your law is true.**  
Trouble and distress have come upon me,  
**but your commands give me delight.**  
Your statutes are always righteous;  
**give me understanding that I may live.**

**Prayer:** Lord God, we confess that we are so very weak. And our enemies seem so powerful. When we are tempted to take pride in our own reason, help us see the error of our ways. By the work of your Spirit open our eyes to see your salvation. Your grace has given us life. Guide us all our days with the perspective and direction of your Word. Help our restless souls find rest in you. Amen.



## Introduction

In 1525, Luther wrote one of his most famous treatises called *On the Bondage of the Will*. He was responding to a piece by the humanist theologian Desiderius Erasmus titled *On the Freedom of the Will*. While Luther did not agree with Erasmus' position, he praised Erasmus for confronting "the heart of the issue." From his perspective, the theological questions that revolved around the matters of the will were some of the most important and relevant issues to clarify. The very nature of "grace" was at stake. Salvation could not be a product of grace alone if the will (human assent) were part of the equation. Luther summarized the Bible's teaching in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed (Small Catechism). He wrote: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

For Luther, the will was "bound" in sin and in slavery to Satan until freed in grace by the gospel. By faith, the believer, then, has a new master and is bound to Christ. The idea that the human will was completely free to make its own decisions and choices in spiritual matters was scripturally foreign to Luther. But we should not extend Luther's perspective too far. He does not say that there is no such thing as a free will in humans. He limits the scope of that free will in humans to matters which are "under us," that is, to secular matters.

The issue had been disputed by theologians for centuries before Luther, and the debate would continue after Luther's death, even among some of his closest colleagues. For Luther, the resolution was found only in statements of Scripture, as contrary to human reason or experience as they might appear.

## The Power of the Word in the Early Church

1. The Greek world prized philosophical wisdom. Paul clearly explains, however, that reason on its own cannot grasp the truth of the gospel. As the Bible verses are read, underline at least three ways you see Paul establishing this truth in this section from 1 Corinthians.

### 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

<sup>2:1</sup> And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. <sup>2</sup> For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. <sup>4</sup> My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

<sup>6</sup>We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. <sup>7</sup>No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. <sup>8</sup>None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.<sup>9</sup> However, as it is written:

“What no eye has seen,  
what no ear has heard,  
and what no human mind has conceived”—  
the things God has prepared for those who love him—  
<sup>10</sup>these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. <sup>11</sup>For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup>What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. <sup>13</sup>This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. <sup>14</sup>The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. <sup>15</sup>The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, <sup>16</sup>for,

“Who has known the mind of the Lord  
so as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ.

2. In verses 10 to 16, circle what you see are important phrases Paul uses to explain the work of the Spirit. Be ready to explain why a phrase you circled is important.

NOTES

3. Read through the following Scripture verses and show how these verses reinforce the truth Paul is explaining here.

A. John 14:15-17,25-27

B. Romans 8:5-17

C. 1 Corinthians 12:1-3

D. Galatians 5:16-26

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## The Power of the Word in the Reformation

Below are various excerpts from Luther's writings—taken from the book *What Luther Says*.

(Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006].)

A. God has given an independent will neither to you nor to anybody else, for self-will comes from the devil and Adam. These two turned their will, received from God, into a will of their own; for a free will is one which has no desires of its own but constantly looks to the will of God. In this way it then also succeeds in remaining free, clinging and cleaving to nothing. Now you notice that in this petition [The Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer] God bids us pray against ourselves, thereby teaching us that we have no greater enemy than ourselves. Our will is the greatest power within us. But we must pray against it: O Father, let me not so fall as to do things according to my own will. Break my will. Restrain my will. Let come what may, only let my lot be determined not by my will but only by Thy will; for so it is in heaven, where there is no self-will. Let it be so also on earth. Putting this prayer into practice is very painful to human nature." (*What Luther Says*, 4655)

- B. Why all this boasting about a free will and the powers of man about the natural light of reason? What is it but blindness and darkness? Can it do anything better than fight against the faith and God's Word? . . . This is why I reject and condemn as nothing but falsehood every doctrine that lauds our free will. Such a teaching is directly opposed to the help and grace of our Savior Jesus Christ. For since, apart from Christ, death and sin are our masters and the devil is our god and prince, there can, then, be neither power nor might, neither wit nor wisdom, by which we may prepare ourselves for righteousness and life or may search for them. On the contrary, we are bound to be blinded, captives of the devil and slaves of sin, to do and to think whatever pleases our masters and is opposed to God with His Commandments. Ah, what a fine freedom that is! (*What Luther Says*, 4664)
- C. We have, of course, in a certain sense a free will in those things which are under us. For the divine mandate has constituted us lords of the fishes of the sea, of the fowls of the air, and of the beasts of the field. These we kill whenever we please. We enjoy the food and the other useful things they supply. But in things pertaining to God, in matters which are above us, man has no free will at all. He is in reality as clay in the hand of a potter, clay which is merely worked on by power from without and is not active itself. Here, then, we choose nothing; we do nothing. On the contrary, we are chosen; we are prepared; we are regenerated; we receive, as Isaiah says: "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (64:8). (*What Luther Says*, 4669)
- D. Reason is able to rule itself so that it does not consent to all lusts so far as performing the external act is concerned; for often it inhibits, often it moderates, vicious impulses. If this ability did not to some extent lie in us, what good would the laws of the state do? What good would discipline do, which, after all, we see God commend so highly? . . . Yet it is impossible to conclude from this that there is a free will, that is, that man is able to control himself without the Holy Spirit, is able to do right, and to please God. Yet this is the chief thing for which the defenders of free will are contending. For evil desire in itself is sin. Nor is it idle, but it is constantly arousing the heart against the Law of God. Nothing good, then, really exists in man if hearts have not first been purified by faith through the Holy Spirit and if the iniquity born with us is not removed through the forgiveness of sins. (*What Luther Says*, 4675)
- E. We can neither help nor advise ourselves that we may have rest and peace of conscience and escape the devil, death, and hell if Christ Himself does not bring us back through His Word and call us to Himself. And when we come to Him and are in the faith, we are not able to keep ourselves in it or to endure unless He Himself constantly lifts and carries us by this same Word and power of His, because the devil everywhere and unceasingly lies in wait for us and "the devil prowls around like a roaring lion," as Peter says, in order to devour us. Therefore it is not at all permissible to boast to any extent whatever about the ability of our free will and power either to begin faith or to continue and remain in faith; but Christ, our Shepherd, must do everything alone. (*What Luther Says*, 4682)

4. “People have free wills.” How do you think Luther would have responded to this statement?
  
5. Luther illustrates the impotence of the will in spiritual matters. Which sections of the Luther quotes demonstrate this?
  
6. Evaluate this statement: Luther’s doctrine of the will gives people an easy excuse to be morally irresponsible.

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## The Power of the Word Today

Teaching about the will continues to be a difficult doctrine that can be distorted in a number of ways. It is still a popular notion that people have “a little bit of good in them” that may be enough to point them in the right direction. Decision theology teaches that people can make a good “choice” to turn their lives over to God. Still others, who claim that the will is indeed powerless to choose, wrongly infer that rejection of the gospel also rests with God’s decision. The reformer John Calvin and those who follow his theology endorse this position, but it is not supported by Scripture, which declares that people bear the blame for rejecting the gospel. (See Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:51.)

Luther conformed his teaching to biblical truth—even when it was difficult to comprehend. Faith is a gift of God received entirely by grace. The Bible explains that we are spiritually “dead” in sin (Ephesians 2). The physically dead need to be raised—they are passive in this action. This is spiritually true in regard to conversion. God “raises us” to faith by the work of the Spirit. The same Spirit also sustains us in faith as we live life on this earth. Although after conversion our wills are “renewed” and can cooperate with the Spirit’s direction, we are still very spiritually weak, since we continue to struggle with our sinful natures.

7. This doctrine about the will distinguishes Lutherans from many other Protestant bodies. In the next two minutes, one-half of the class list reasons why it is important to maintain the truth of this doctrine. The other half of the class list reasons why it is so difficult to maintain. We'll hear samplings from each group.

**Important to maintain**

**Difficult to maintain**

8. What is one lesson from Luther you will want to remember from today's study?

## Summary

Luther understood the importance of doctrinal clarity in regard to the understanding of the will. He took the Scriptures at face value and advised not to search out the "hidden" things of God. Our knowledge of God and his ways is limited both by what he has revealed and our abilities to grasp his ways. Luther's theology of the will underscores his emphasis on the need to stay connected to Word and sacrament as means to maintain spiritual nourishment and strength. The Spirit of God operates powerfully through these means.

## At Home

In your prayers this week, thank the Holy Spirit for bringing you to faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior. Pray also for a person you know who doesn't believe in Jesus or whose faith is weak or troubled.

## Additional Reading

Read Article II of the *Formula of Concord* (“Free Will”)

## Closing Prayer

**Hymn:** “Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord” (CW 176)

1. Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord!  
May all your graces be outpoured  
On each believer’s mind and heart;  
Your fervent love to them impart.  
Lord, by the brightness of your light  
In holy faith your church unite  
From ev’ry land and ev’ry tongue;  
This to your praise, O Lord our God, be sung:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!
2. Come, holy Light, Guide divine,  
And cause the Word of life to shine.  
Teach us to know our God aright  
And call him Father with delight.  
From ev’ry error keep us free;  
Let none but Christ our Master be  
That we in living faith abide,  
In him, our Lord, with all our might confide.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!
3. Come, holy Fire, Comfort true;  
Grant us the will your work to do  
And in your service to abide;  
Let trials turn us not aside.  
Lord, by your power prepare each heart,  
And to our weakness strength impart  
That bravely here we may contend,  
Through life and death to you, our Lord, ascend.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!