

Bondage of the Will (Selected Material)

by Martin Luther (1525)

Translated by Edward Thomas Vaughan (1823)

A Response to Erasmus' On Free Will

SECT. 12. All the law does is to show sin.

If Freewill — assisted by the law and occupied in the law with all its might — profits nothing, and does not justify, but is left in ungodliness and flesh, then what are we to think it can do alone, without the law?

"By the law," he says, "is the knowledge of sin." He shows here how much, and how far, the law profits a man. In other words, Freewill is so blind when left to herself, as not even to know sin, but to stand in need of the law for a teacher. Now, what can someone endeavor towards taking away sin, who does not know what sin is? This is what he can do: he can take sin as *no* sin and take what is *not* sin for sin — as experience abundantly shows. How the world persecutes the righteousness of God which is preached in the Gospel! It vilifies it as heresy, error, and all other kinds of the worst possible names, by the instrumentality of those very persons whom she considers the best of men, and the most zealous for righteousness and godliness. Meanwhile, she boasts and brags about her own works and actions as though they were righteousness and wisdom, but in reality, they are sin and error. Paul therefore stops the mouth of Freewill with his words, by teaching that sin is shown to her by the law. She herself is someone who does not know what sin is. This is how far Paul is from granting Freewill any power to strive after good.

And here is answered that question of Diatribe's, so often repeated throughout her whole treatise, 'If we can do nothing, what is the use of so many laws, so many precepts, so many threatenings, so many promises?' Paul replies here, "By the law is the knowledge of sin." He gives a far different answer to this question than what man or Freewill thinks. Freewill is not proved by the law, he says; she does not work together with it unto righteousness: for righteousness is not by the law, but by the knowledge of sin. This is the benefit, this the effect, this the office of the law: to be a light to the ignorant and blind. And it is such a light that it shows disease, sin, wickedness, death, hell, and the wrath of God, are ours; but it does not help or release us from them. She is content with having shown us what our state is. Upon knowing his disease of sin, the man is sad, afflicted, and despairing. The law does not help him; and much less can he help himself. Another light is necessary to show him his remedy. This light is the word of the Gospel, displaying Christ as the deliverer from all these. It is not Reason or Freewill which makes Him known. No indeed; how could she make him known when she herself is very darkness, needing the light of the law to show her that self-disease which she does not see by her own light, but imagines to be soundness.

SECT. 13. Confirmed by Gal 3.19 and Rom 5.20.

In Galatians, too, he treats the same question in just the same way, when he asks, What then is the law? And he answers this question, not as Diatribe would, by saying that it proves there is such a thing as

Freewill, but by saying, "It was ordained for the sake of transgressions, until the seed comes, to which he had made the promise." For the sake of transgressions, he says. It is not to restrain them, as Jerome dreams (since Paul maintains that it was promised to the Seed who would come, that He would take away and restrain sin by the free gift of righteousness); but to increase transgressions, as he writes in Rom 5.20, "The law stole in, that sin might abound."

It is not that, without the law, there were no sins, or that sins did not abound. But because transgressions were not known to be transgressions, or such great offences, the greater part, and the greatest of them, were accounted righteousness. Now, if sin is not known, there is no room for remedy and no hope, because they would not bear the hand of the physician — for they are whole in their own eyes, having no need of a physician. The law is therefore necessary to make sin known; so that, by knowing the baseness and vastness of his sin, the proud man, who seems whole in his own eyes, may be humbled, and may sigh and pant after the grace which is set before him in Christ. See what a simple sentence is here! "By the law is the knowledge of sin." Yet this sentence itself is powerful enough to confound and overturn Freewill. For if it is true that she does not know, of herself, what sin and wickedness are, then as Paul says both here and in Rom 7.7 ("I would not have known lust to be sin, except the law had said, 'You shall not covet'"), how will she ever know what righteousness and goodness are?

If she does not know what righteousness is, how will she ever strive after it? We do not know the sin in which we have been born, in which we live and move and have our being; or rather, which lives and moves and *reigns* in us. How then could we know righteousness which reigns without us, in the heavens? What a mere nothing, and less than nothing, these words make of that wretched thing called Freewill!

SECT. 14. Rom 3.21-25 contains many thunderbolts against Freewill.

These things being so, Paul makes a proclamation with full confidence and authority, saying, "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the Prophets; the righteousness of God, I say, by faith in Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all those who believe in him. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God has set forth as a propitiation by faith in his blood," etc. Here Paul utters nothing but thunderbolts against Freewill.

First thunderbolt

He says that the righteousness of God without the law is manifested. He separates the righteousness of God from the righteousness of the law, because the righteousness of faith comes by grace, without the law. When he says, "without the law," he can mean nothing else than that Christian righteousness is perfectly independent of the works of the law — such that the works of the law have no worth or power to obtain it.

He says soon after, "We determine that a man is justified by faith without the works of the law:" and he has said already, "By the deeds of the law no flesh is justified before him." From all of this, it is most plain that the endeavor or desire of Freewill is absolutely nothing. For if the righteousness of God consists without the law and without the works of the law, then how will it not much more consist without Freewill? Since it is the highest endeavor of Freewill to be exercised about a moral righteousness, or the

works of the law; its blindness and impotency are aided by this. This word 'without' clears away works that are morally good; it clears away moral righteousness; it clears away preparations for grace. In short, invent whatever you may as a performance which Freewill is equal to, and Paul will persist in saying, 'the righteousness of God has nothing to do with this,'

Now, even if I were to grant that Freewill might by its own endeavor make advances somewhere — that is, towards good works, or the righteousness of the civil law, or the moral law — it still advances no way at all towards the righteousness of God, nor does God account its endeavors worthy of any regard towards obtaining his righteousness, when he says that his righteousness avails without the law. If Freewill, then, makes no advances towards the righteousness of God, what would it profit it by advancing through its own performances and endeavors (if this were possible) even to the holiness of angels? These surely are no obscure or ambiguous words; no place is left here for any tropes. Paul manifestly distinguishes two sorts of righteousness. He ascribes one to the law, the other to grace, affirming that grace is freely given without the law and its works; but that the law does not justify or avail anything without grace.

Let me be made to see then, how Freewill can subsist and be defended amidst these objections.

Second thunderbolt

The second thunderbolt is that he says the righteousness of God is manifested, and is in force, *to* all and *upon* all who believe in Christ; and that there is no difference.

Again, in the clearest terms, he divides the whole human race into two parts, and gives the righteousness of God to believers, while he takes it away from unbelievers. Is anyone so mad then, as to doubt that the power or endeavor of Free will is something different from faith in Christ? Now, Paul denies that anything which subsists outside the limits of this faith, is righteous before God; and if it is not righteous before God, it must be sin. For with God there is nothing left midway between righteousness and sin, as a sort of neutral substance — neither righteousness nor sin. Otherwise, Paul's whole argument would fail, which proceeds upon this division of things: namely, that whatever is done and carried on among men, is either righteousness or sin. It is righteousness if it is done in faith; it is sin if it is done without faith. With men, there are actions, it is true, of a middle and neutral character, in which they neither owe nor yield anything to each other mutually. But the ungodly man sins against God, whether he eats or drinks, or whatever he does, because he is perpetually using God's creations wickedly and ungratefully, without giving glory to God from his heart at any moment.

Third thunderbolt

This also is no light thunderbolt, where Paul says, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God: nor is there any difference." What could be said more clearly, I ask? Suppose a man acts by his Freewill — tell me whether this man sins in that self-endeavor of his. If he does not sin, why does Paul not except him but instead involves him among the rest, without any distinction? Assuredly, saying *all have sinned* excepts none in any place, at any time, for any performance, for any endeavor. If you except a man for any endeavor or work, you make Paul a liar, because this Freewill worker, or endeavorer, is numbered among the *all*, and in the *all*; Paul should have revered him, and not numbered him so freely and so generally among the sinners.

Fourth thunderbolt

So again, it is no light thunderbolt, Paul's saying that they are devoid of the glory of God. The glory of God may be understood with a difference here: *actively* and *passively*. Paul contrives this by his use of the Hebrew idioms, in which he is frequent. *Actively*, the glory of God is that with which God glories in us. *Passively*, it is that with which we glory in him. I think it should be understood passively here. The faith of Christ, in the Latin, expresses the faith which *Christ* has; but in the Hebrew, the faith of Christ is understood to mean the faith which *we* have towards Christ.

So, the righteousness of God, in Latin, means the righteousness which God possesses, but by the Hebrews it is understood to mean the righteousness which we have from God, and before God. Thus, I understand the glory of God not Latin-wise, but Hebrew-wise, as denoting the glory which we have *in* God, and *before* God, and which may be called *glory in God*. Someone glories in God, then, who knows for sure, that God has favor towards him, and counts him worthy of a kind regard — so that what he does is pleasing in His sight, or whatever displeases Him is freely forgiven and borne with.

If the endeavors of Freewill are not sin, then, but goodness in the sight of God, assuredly she may boast. And with confidence in that glory, she may say, 'this pleases God,' 'God looks with an eye of favour upon this,' 'God ascribes worthiness to this and accepts it, or at least He bears with and forgives it.' For this is the sort of glory which the faithful have in God; others who do not have it, are instead confounded before him. But Paul denies this glory to *all* men here. He affirms that they are absolutely devoid of this glory, which experience also proves. Ask the entire party of Freewill endeavors, without exception, and if you can show me *one* who seriously, from his heart, can say of any one desire and endeavor of his, 'I know this is well pleasing to God,' I will acknowledge that I am conquered, and I will yield the palm to you. But I know that no such man will be found.

Now, if this glory is lacking, so that conscience does not dare to know with certainty, or be confident, that this particular act is pleasing to God, then we may be sure that it does not please God. Because, as the man believes, so it is with him. For he does not believe that he certainly pleases God. However, this is necessary, since this is the very crime of unbelief, to doubt of the favor of God. He would have us believe with the most assured faith that He favors us. Thus, we prove by the very testimony of their own conscience, that since Freewill is destitute of the glory of God, she perpetually subjects herself to the charge of unbelief, together with all her powers, desires, and endeavors.

Fifth thunderbolt

But what will the defenders of Freewill say at last to that which follows; "being justified *freely* by His grace?" What is this "freely?" What is this "by His grace?" How do endeavor and merit square with a gratuitous and freely-given righteousness? Perhaps they will say here that they ascribe the least thing possible to Freewill — by no means a merit of condignity [i.e., worthiness]. But these are empty words; for the very aim of Freewill is to make room for merit. This has been Diatribe's perpetual complaint and expostulation. 'If there is no freedom in the will, what place is there for merit? If there is no place for merit, what place is there for reward? To what will it be imputed, if a man is justified without merit?'

Paul replies here that there is absolutely no such thing as merit, but that as many as are justified, are all justified freely. And this is not imputed to anything but the grace of God. But with the gift of righteousness, at the same time, are bestowed the kingdom and eternal life. Where now is the endeavor, the desire, the pains, and the merit of Freewill? What is the use of these things? You cannot complain of obscurity and ambiguity; the matter and the words are most clear and simple. For what if they do attribute the least thing possible to Freewill —they still teach us that we can obtain righteousness and grace by this very little thing.

For they do not resolve that question, 'Why does God justify this man and leave the other in his sins,' other than by setting up Freewill; that is to say, that the one man has endeavored, and the other has not; and that

God respects one of these characters for his endeavor and despises the other — that He may not be unjust, as he would be if he acted otherwise. Indeed, even though they pretend both in their writings and in their speakings, that they do not obtain grace by merit of condignity, and do not call it merit of condignity, still they mock us with a word, and no less hold fast to the thing. For what excuse is it, that they do not *call* it merit of condignity, when they still ascribe to it everything which belongs to merit of condignity? For instance, that he who endeavors, finds favor with God; he who does not endeavor, finds none. Is not this plainly a merit of worth? Do they not make God a respecter of works, of merits, and of persons? For instance, that the one has himself to blame for lacking grace, because he has not endeavored; and the other, because he has endeavored, gets grace — he would not have had it, if he had not endeavored. If this is *not* a merit of worth, I would be glad to know what *can* be called merit of worth. You might trifle in this manner with all sorts of words and say that it is not really a merit of condignity, but it does what merit of condignity usually does. The thorn is not a bad tree, it only does what a bad tree does. The fig-tree is not a sound tree, but it does what a good tree usually does. Diatribe truly is not an abandoned woman, but only says and does what abandoned women are prone to do.

Sophists are worse than the Pelagians.

These defenders of Freewill have met with the misfortune described in that old saying, 'He falls into Scylla by wishing to avoid Charybdis.' Through a desire to dissent from the Pelagians, they began by denying the merit of condignity, and by the very ground on which they deny it, they more strongly affirm it; denying with word and pen what in reality and in heart they affirm and making themselves twofold worse than the Pelagians.

First, the Pelagians simply, candidly, and ingenuously confess and assert a merit of condignity, calling a boat a boat, a fig-tree a fig-tree; and teaching what they think. But our "friends," though they think and teach the same thing, beguile us meanwhile with lying words, and with a false show of dissenting from the Pelagians. But in reality, they do nothing less than this — so that, if you look at the character we impersonate, you see in us the most determined enemies of the Pelagians; but if you look at our real mind, we are double Pelagians.

Secondly, inasmuch as, by this assumption, we estimate and purchase the grace of God at a far lower rate than the Pelagians. They assert that it is not some small thing which is in us whereby we obtain grace, but

many great, whole, full, and perfect endeavors and performances. Our "friends," on the contrary, account it to be a very small thing, and next to nothing, by which we earn grace.

If we must be in error, therefore, those persons err more honestly and with less pride, who affirm that the grace of God is purchased at a great price (reckoning it to be dear and precious), than those who teach that it is bought for a little, and for a very little, accounting it mean and contemptible.

But Paul beats them both together into one mass by a single word, when he says that "all are justified freely." And again, "that they are justified without the law;" "without the deeds of the law." In asserting free justification as the justifier of all men, he leaves none to work, or to merit, or to prepare themselves, and he leaves no work that can be called congruous or deserving. Rather, he breaks in pieces, by one stroke of this thunderbolt, both the Pelagians with their entire merit, and the Sophists with their little modicum of merit. Free justification does not allow you to set up workers of *any* sort; inasmuch as 'free gift,' and 'prepare yourself by some work,' are manifest opposites. Again, justification by grace does not allow for any personal worthiness, as Paul says afterwards in Rom 11.6, "If by grace, then is it no more of works; otherwise, grace is no more grace." He also says in Rom 4.4, "Now to him that works, the reward is reckoned, not of grace, but of debt." So that my friend Paul stands up as the invincible destroyer of Freewill, laying two whole armies flat on their faces with a single word. For if we are justified without works, all works are condemned, both small and great. He excepts none but fulminates equally against all.

SECT. 18. The Fathers overlooked Paul.

See here, also, how drowsy all our friends have been; and of what profit it is to a man, if he has leaned on the authority of the old Fathers, approved as those have been, through 'such a series of ages.' Have not they also been all equally blind; rather, have not they also overlooked Paul's most clear and most express words? Is it possible that anything could be said clearly and expressly for grace, in opposition to Freewill, pray, if Paul's discourse be not clear and express?

He pursues his argument by way of comparison, making his boast of grace in opposition to works. And then, in the clearest and plainest terms, he declares that we are justified freely; and that grace is not grace if it is procured by our works. He most explicitly excludes all works in the matter of justification, so that he may establish only grace, and gratuitous justification. And yet, would we still look for darkness amid this light? And when we cannot ascribe great things and everything to ourselves, would we endeavor to ascribe very small and inconsiderable things to ourselves, just to carry the point that justification is not free, and without works, and by the grace of God? Truly, it is as if the man who denies that we are supplied with the *greater* things, and the *all* things which are necessary to justification, does not much more deny that we are supplied with the *little* things, and the *few* things — and all the while, he is maintaining that we are justified only by His grace, without works of any kind, and even without the law itself, in which all works, both great and small, both works of congruity, and works of condignity, are comprehended! Go now, and boast of the authority of the ancients, and trust to their sayings, all of whom to a man, as you perceive, have overlooked Paul, that most clear and explicit doctor! No; indeed, they have, as it were, designedly gotten out of the way of this day-star, or rather of this sun — being so engrossed, truly, with the carnal imagination, that it seemed absurd to them that there could be no place left for merits.

SECT. 19. Paul's citation of the example of Abraham searched and applied.

Let me adduce the example of Abraham, which Paul subsequently adduces: "If Abraham, was justified by works, he has glory; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness."

Here again, observe Paul's division. He distinctly mentions two righteousnesses of Abraham. One is of WORKS, which is moral and civil; but by this he denies that he was justified before God, even though he was just before men by it. Moreover, he has glory with men; although even this man, by this righteousness, also comes short of the glory of God. Nor can anyone say that the works of the ceremonial law are condemned here, since Abraham lived so many years before the law. Paul speaks simply of the works of Abraham; and those were none other than his best. It would be ridiculous to reason whether a man is justified by bad works. If then Abraham is not just by any works of his, and unless he is clothed with another righteousness, that of pure faith, then he is left under the charge of ungodliness, both as to his person and all his works. It is plain that no man makes any advances towards righteousness by his own works: and further, that no works, no desires, no endeavors of Freewill, are of any avail before God; but are all accounted ungodly, unjust, and wicked. If the man is not just, then his works and desires are not just; and if they are not just, then they are damnable, and worthy of wrath.

The other righteousness is that of FAITH, which does not stand in any works, but in God's favor and His manner of accounting of us, through grace. And see how Paul dwells on that word 'accounting of us,' how he urges, repeats, and beats it into us.

"To him who works," he says, 'the reward is reckoned, not of grace, but of debt. But to him who does not work, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness; according to the purpose of the grace of God.'" Then he adduces David speaking in like manner of the reckoning of grace; saying, "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord has not imputed sin, " etc.

Nearly ten times in that same chapter, he repeats the word *imputation*. To be short, Paul compares the worker and the non-worker: leaving none between these two. He denies that righteousness is imputed to the worker; he asserts that righteousness is imputed to the non-worker, if he but believes. It is not possible for Freewill to escape or slip away here with her endeavor, or pains; for she must be numbered either with the worker, or the non-worker. If with the worker, you hear in this place that no righteousness is imputed to her; and if with the nonworker, whoever believes in God, righteousness is imputed to her. But then she would not be Freewill; she would be the new creature — the soul renewed by faith.

Now, if righteousness is not imputed to the one that works, it is plain that his works are nothing but sins, wicked and ungodly acts in the sight of God. Nor is it possible for any Sophist to turn saucy, and say, 'though the *man* is wicked, yet his *work* may not be wicked.'

For Paul lays hold, not on the person of the man simply, but on the man *at work*, for this very purpose: that he may declare in the most explicit terms, how the very works and endeavors of the man are condemned, whatever those may be, and under whatever name or species they may be classed. Moreover, he treats good works because he is discoursing about justification and merit. And when he speaks of a

man who works, he speaks universally about all working men, and all their works, but especially about good and honest works. Otherwise, his division into worker and non-worker would not stand.