

Reformation Reflections

LAW AND GOSPEL

In December of 1525, Dr. Martin Luther curiously wrote the following in the conclusion to his seminal work, “The Bondage of the Will.”

I praise and commend you highly for this also, that ... you alone have attacked the real issue ... and have not wearied me with irrelevancies about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such trifles ...

So who was Luther “praising” for attacking him? Desiderius Erasmus, probably the greatest scholar of that age, who’d finally been convinced to write against Luther. From the title of Erasmus’ earlier tract, “On the Freedom of the Will”, as well as from the title of Luther’s response (see above), you might guess the “real issue” was one of free will or the lack of it.



Actually, a closer look at both works reveals that it was more an issue of how one reads Scripture and applies it. In particular, Erasmus would frequently assert that God’s commands to obey (that is, the Law) prove that we must have the moral ability or free will to do them.

Luther counters with Scripture: **“when you are finished with all your commands and exhortations ... I’ll write Romans 3:20 over top of it all”** (“... through the law comes knowledge of sin”).

In other words, God’s commands (or his Law) are not there to reveal our ability to obey, but our inability.

Erasmus, for his part, was simply working within the framework established a century earlier by theologian Gabriel Biel, which can be summed up with the maxim: “Do what is in you and God will not deny you grace.”

Luther, however, saw the fallacy of this—both in his own life experience and in Holy Scripture. There Paul reminds us that *“none is righteous, no not one; no one understands; no one who seeks for God”* (Romans 3:10-11) and Jesus himself tells us that apart from him, we *“can do nothing”* (John 15:5).

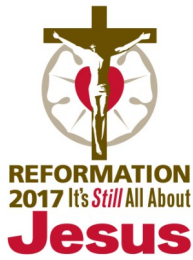
Simply put, the Law was not designed to do what Erasmus wanted it to do—namely, to give us a way to save ourselves. As Luther points out:

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.

No, the only thing that can save us from all that is the Gospel—the glorious good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us (2 Cor. 5:19). After remarking that his own will was definitely not up to the task of saving him, Luther explained the Gospel this way:

But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him. Furthermore, I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merit of my works, but by reason of His merciful favor promised to me; so that, if I work too little, or badly, He does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying of all the saints in their God.

Turns out Jesus was right after all: *“If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed”* (John 8:36).



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