**SERMON - Bondage of the Will, “What is ‘free will?’”**

We started out our study on Luther’s most important writing, according to himself, in 1525, “the Bondage of the Will.” He wrote that against Desiderius Erasmus who wrote a book on “the Freedom of the Will.” The **first Sunday** we heard that Erasmus does not like “assertions.” Or, better put, “strong confession of what you believe.” Luther, on the other hand, cannot understand this aversion to assertions for, according to him, “How do you as man live without any assertion/conviction?” The **second Sunday** we heard that Erasmus viewed Scripture as “unclear, and since it is unclear, we cannot come to know God.” So, he advises, focus therefore on what is clear, on what you know, and that is “how to live, rightly.” Jesus teaches that in the Sermon on the Mount.

Luther, on the other hand, responded by saying, “God is clear in the Scriptures as to what He wants you to know of Him and who you are. Also, God is clear as to the relationship He has with you, and with all that He created.”

Today we are coming to Luther pointing out to Erasmus that he wrote a book on the ‘free will’ but does not want to talk about it. So, Luther said, let’s talk about it, and he then follows Erasmus outline. Erasmus started out by saying:

*“We should s****trive with all our might,*** *resort the healing balm of penitence, and* ***try by all means*** *to compass[guide/direct] the mercy of God, without which man’s will and endeavour is ineffective.” And this, “Nobody should despair of pardon from a God who by nature is kindness itself.”*

The one moment Erasmus does not know who God is, and the next moment he knows. God is merciful, by nature, kind. “How do you know that Erasmus?” Luther responded. “Your words are without Christ, which makes them chillier than ice. They spoil the beauty of your eloquence. I guess your superiors [*Pope and bishops*] dragged them out of you lest you should seem an utter atheist. Anyway, this is what you are saying: *‘There is strength in us, and there is such a thing as striving with all one’s strength. And there is mercy in God and there is a way of reaching that mercy, since God is kind and by nature, merciful*.’”

**Please note how Erasmus argues:** He does not mention sin, or the state of fallen humanity, nor Christ and what He came to do. Erasmus focuses on what man does, and, the God that is, who is kind and just, will repay him. So, do not worry so much about God. Focus on yourself - God is a ‘good guy’ and he will repay you.

Erasmus did not leave it there. He continues to say, “It is irreligious, idle and superfluous ‘to want to know’ whether our will effects anything in matters pertaining to eternal salvation, or whether it is wholly passive under the work of grace.”

**Luther responded to Erasmus saying**, “So, on the one hand you say all Christians have to do is to strive with all their might to do the good, and they have it in themselves to do it. Then, on the other hand you say, that without God’s mercy and kindness, they will not be able to achieve it. The problem is, that you Erasmus, do not define the limits: Till where can man act or strive - how high can a man go before he needs God’s kindness and mercy to go the full way. Where do these two meets?”

I tell you what, Luther continues, **I will use a few analogies** (*make a few comparisons*) and hopefully you can see yourself in it, and how you argue. What would you think of a farmer who wants a rich crop, and was not idle enough to perform the superfluous task of investigating the nature of the soil, but rushed into action, thinking of nothing but the work, and ploughed the seashore and cast his seed wherever there was room, whether in the sand or in the mud - what would you think of him?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Tell me Erasmus, what would you think of such a person? I will add a text from the Gospel, from **Luke 24:28;** *“For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?”*

In just this way, you prescribe for us nothing but things to do, and yet you forbid us to examine, measure and take knowledge of the limits of our ability, as if this were an idle, superfluous and irreligious enquiry. To think of it, the philosophers are fools and madmen to inquire this, but you, your madness is greater still in that you assure us that this folly is the loveliest Christian piety, gravity, serious godliness - and salvation. And if we do not do as you tell us, you assert (*you, the sworn foe of assertions*) we are irreligious, idle and empty!

**Confidence in your own ability drives you along here**; you think that by your eloquence you can so dupe the public that nobody will realize what you cherish in your heart and what you are trying to achieve by these slippery writings of yours. But God is not mocked, and it is not good policy to run against Him.

If you have said all this with reference to writing poetry, or preparing for harvest, or military, it would still be outrageous, yet it could be forgiven you, by Christians, who pay no regard to these temporal things. But when you tell Christian people to let this folly guide them in their labours, and charge them in their pursuits of eternal salvation they should not concern themselves to know what is in their power and what is not - why, this is plainly the sin that is really unpardonable. For as long as they do not know the limits of their ability, they will not know what they should do; and as long as they do not know what they should do, they cannot repent when they err; and **impenitence is the unpardonable sin.** This is where your moderate, sceptical theology leads us.

So it is not irreligious, idle, or superfluous, but in the highest degree wholesome and necessary, for a Christian to know whether or not his will has anything to do in matters pertaining to salvation.

**John 17:3-5***“This is eternal life: that* ***they know you,*** *the only true God, and the One whom you sent, Jesus Christ. I glorified you on the earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory which I had with you before the world existed.”*

“This is eternal life...” Jesus is not defining eternal life, but he is explaining what it means to possess eternal life and how it is expressed in those who have it. The article before means “the eternal life I am talking about, the only genuine eternal life—this is what it consists of...” Every religion of the world has this in common that it searches for a way to live forever in bliss and happiness apart from evil. Only, in the case of most, this final goal is sought apart from the true God and apart from a divine Saviour from sin. Their hope, therefore, remains an empty one. Jesus on the other hand clarifies of what true life consists.

**AMEN**

**INSERT**

Erasmus book is on the “Free Will of man,” however, as Luther pointed out to Erasmus, “you do not want to talk about it.” This is ridiculous. He said, “We should be very clear as to what power does ‘free will’ has. For you, Erasmus, contradicts yourself. You do not want to talk about ‘free will’ but the next moment you say, ‘man must strive with all his might … to do what is right.’” For, as you argue, God is a ‘good guy,’ and He will not overlook your striving, your effort.”

Erasmus focus was on the Law, on the works man does. So Luther confronted him by asking, “What do you mean by ‘strive?’” This is the hinge on which the discussion between Luther and Erasmus turned, the crucial issue between them, Luther said. He continued, “Our aim is, simply, to investigate what ability ‘free will’ has, in what respect it is the subject of Divine action and how it stands related to the grace of God. If we know nothing of these things, we shall know nothing whatsoever of Christianity, and shall be in a worse case than any people on earth!”

In our day you will find the thinking of Erasmus continue when people argue that religious truths does not exist in religions, it exists in a person. Wilfred Smith, in a book “The meaning and end of religion,” argues that personal faith in a Muslim can be truer than in a Christian. And, also, the Christian faith can be less true today than it’s was yesterday. He concludes by saying, “… if one is going to talk of religions at all, then one must recognize that every religion is new every morning.”

Erasmus would love Smith’s talk. For Erasmus it is all about what I do, and he has drawn up a list of what you should do. Since God is just and merciful, He will give you what you have earned. Your life depends on your “striving” to do the good, and for that, the ‘just’ God will give you what you have earned.

When you get what Erasmus has done, drawing up a list of what you should do, then you see that Scriptures does not matter, God is nowhere in the picture, and of Jesus Christ he has not heard. It is all about “you” and “you’re striving to do the good.” Through that, you better yourself and society.

Luther’s counter argument was simply to ask: Do you know what your limits are as a sinful, human being? You don’t and whilst you don’t how come you talk with so much surety, so much conviction of what man should ‘strive’ to do? You, who do not like “assertions,” assert that man can do or accomplish anything simply by striving to do it. You call that “religious,” or “pious,” and of us who say, “we want to be sure and certain of who we are, what our limits are, and where we are going,” of us you say, “impious, irreligious people.”

1. **= another analogy is: …** and what of a man who wants to make war, and wants a glorious victory, was not so idle as to reflect upon what was in his power, whether the treasury could finance him, whether the soldiers were fit, whether there was opportunity for action; but disregarded the historian’s advice (saying, before acting, deliberate, and when you have deliberated, act speedily), and charged ahead with eyes shut and ears stopped, shouting nothing but ‘War! War! - pressing on with the work? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)