

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

HAMARTIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Sin

The Catastrophe from Which the Gospel Rescues Us

UNIT 6: THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL THE WILL'S ENSLAVEMENT AND ITS LIBERATION BY GRACE

Lesson 16

Luther, Erasmus, and the Great Debate

The Bondage of the Will vs. The Freedom of the Will

The Theological and Historical Stakes of the Most Important Debate of the Reformation Era

“If we believe that it is not in our power to be saved, but that this depends entirely on the will of God, we shall wait on Him with true humility and call upon His mercy.” — Martin Luther

Key Texts: John 8:34–36; Romans 6:17–20; 8:7–8; 2 Timothy 2:25–26; Philippians 2:13; John 1:12–13

“Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.’”

John 8:34–36, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Unit 5 has established the doctrine of total depravity in its three major dimensions: the comprehensive corruption of every human faculty (Lesson 13), the total inability of the corrupted faculties for genuine spiritual good (Lesson 14), and the radical corruption of the heart as the source from which all the specific expressions of depravity flow (Lesson 15). With Unit 6, we turn to what may be the most historically consequential specific debate generated by the doctrine of total depravity: the question of the will's freedom and bondage. The two lessons of Unit 6 approach this question from two complementary angles: Lesson 16 examines the historical and theological debate between Luther and Erasmus in the sixteenth century, which established the terms for the subsequent Protestant discussion; Lesson 17 examines Augustine's fourfold analysis of the will's condition in each of the four states of human existence, which provides the most comprehensive historical-theological framework for understanding the will's journey from creation through fall through redemption to final glorification.

The debate between Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus in 1524–1525 is the single most important theological controversy of the Reformation era, not the dispute about indulgences (which was its occasion), not the debate about church polity (which was its institutional expression), but the debate about the will's freedom or bondage in relation to salvation. Luther himself recognized this with characteristic directness: when Erasmus published his *On the Freedom of the Will* in 1524, choosing the question of the will as the one point on which he would engage Luther in sustained theological combat, Luther responded with the admission that Erasmus had “seized the thing by the throat”, that he had identified the one question that was genuinely foundational to all the rest. Luther's own response in 1525, *De Servo Arbitrio* (*On the Bondage of the Will*), was the work he considered his most important theological writing, more significant than even the *Ninety-Five Theses*, because it addressed the doctrinal foundation upon which the entire Reformation's understanding of grace, salvation, and the glory of God rested.

The question at the center of the debate is deceptively simple: when a person comes to saving faith, what is the decisive factor? Is it the sovereign grace of God, working monergistically through the Spirit's effectual calling to create in the sinner the very faith she could not generate on her own? Or is it the exercise of human free will in response to the grace that God universally provides, making the ultimate difference between the saved and the unsaved the person's own choice? Luther and Erasmus answered this question differently, and the difference was not trivial. It determined how one understands grace (as a universal offer or a sovereign work), how one understands faith (as a human response or a divine gift), how one understands the glory of conversion (as shared between God and the convert or belonging entirely to God), and ultimately how one understands the gospel (as genuinely good news about what God has done or as merely the announcement of an opportunity that each person must seize by her own effort).

This lesson examines the Luther-Erasmus debate in five major sections: the historical context and significance of the debate (Section I); Erasmus' position and his understanding of free will (Section II); Luther's central thesis and the two-riders metaphor (Section III); the crucial philosophical distinction between freedom from external compulsion and ability to choose God (Section IV), including the contributions of Calvin and Jonathan Edwards to the bondage-of-the-will doctrine; and the theological stakes of the entire debate for the understanding of grace, glory, and the gospel (Section V). A sixth section develops the pastoral and doxological implications.

The student who works through this lesson will emerge with a clear understanding of why this is not merely an antiquarian historical debate but the most theologically foundational question in the entire Christian understanding of salvation. The answer to the will-question determines everything else: how one prays for the lost, how one understands and preaches the gospel, how one accounts for the difference between those who believe and those who do not, and where the glory of every conversion ultimately resides. Luther was right to call it the most important issue: as he observed in *De Servo Arbitrio*, “If we do not know what we can and cannot do, and what God can and cannot do in our salvation, we know nothing of salvation.”

I. The Historical Context

How the Greatest Debate of the Reformation Was Joined

A. *Erasmus and the Humanist Challenge to Luther*

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466–1536) was the most celebrated scholar in Europe at the time of the Reformation, the prince of humanists, the editor of the Greek New Testament, the author of the *Praise of Folly*, and the most respected intellectual voice of his generation. His relationship with Luther was complex: he had criticized the corruption and superstition of the medieval church with devastating wit, and his editorial work on the Greek New Testament had provided the scholars of the Reformation with the textual tools for their exegetical project. But Erasmus was not a Reformer in Luther's sense. He was a reformer of manners and scholarship, not of doctrine; and when Luther's challenge to Rome threatened to tear the fabric of the church and destabilize the social order, Erasmus grew increasingly uncomfortable with the movement he had helped to prepare.

In 1524, under pressure from Pope Adrian VI and the Catholic authorities who were urging the leading intellectuals of Europe to publicly oppose Luther, Erasmus published his *Diatribes seu Collatio de Libero Arbitrio* (On Free Will). Erasmus was a careful, cautious, and intellectually honest scholar, and his treatise is remarkable for its frank acknowledgment of the complexity of the biblical evidence. He admitted that there were texts that seemed to support Luther's position; he acknowledged that the question was genuinely difficult; and he stated explicitly that he was not writing a thoroughgoing systematic treatment but a preliminary examination of the issue. But his conclusion was clear: the human will retains, even after the fall, a genuine capacity to turn to God, however weakened it may be, however dependent on grace for any meritorious act, and the biblical commands to repent, believe, and obey presuppose that the human being addressed has the genuine capacity to comply.

Erasmus' argument rested on several interlocking claims. First, the biblical commands to human beings presuppose human ability: it would be irrational, even unjust, for God to command what the commanded person is constitutively incapable of performing. Second, the tradition of the church, including the majority of the church fathers, had consistently maintained that the human will cooperates with grace in the saving transaction, and this majority tradition should carry considerable weight against a novel interpretation. Third, while Erasmus acknowledged that some texts seemed to teach the servile will, the weight of the whole canonical and traditional evidence favored the free will position. And fourth, practical considerations of moral seriousness and human accountability required a free will: without genuine freedom of choice, the ascription of moral responsibility to human beings became incoherent.

B. *Luther's Response: Seizing the Thing by the Throat*

Luther's response to Erasmus in *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525) opened with a remarkable acknowledgment: of all the objections that had been raised against him by all his opponents, only Erasmus had identified the genuine core of the dispute. The others had attacked him on peripheral questions, indulgences, papal authority, the number of sacraments, while avoiding the central theological question. Erasmus alone had understood that the decisive issue was the question of the will's freedom or bondage, and for this Luther gave him genuine credit even as he mounted a devastating theological rebuttal.

Luther's response was methodologically distinctive. He did not primarily argue from the tradition (as Erasmus had done, appealing to the majority of the fathers); he argued from Scripture, and from Scripture interpreted through the grammatical-historical method that the Reformers had established against the allegorical tradition. Luther worked through the biblical texts that Erasmus had cited for free will and argued that they could not bear the weight Erasmus had placed on them, and he marshaled his own battery of biblical texts to establish the servile will with exegetical force. But Luther's argument was not merely exegetical; it was also theologically coherent in a way that Erasmus' position was not. Luther argued that Erasmus had made grace unnecessary by making free will decisive: if the human will's choice is the factor that ultimately determines who is saved, then the grace that makes the choice possible is not the decisive cause of salvation but merely its precondition, and the glory of salvation belongs at least in part to the person who made the right choice.

Luther also exposed a fundamental incoherence in the Erasmian position that proved difficult to answer. Erasmus had argued that God commands what is possible for human beings to perform, and therefore the biblical commands presuppose human ability. Luther responded that this argument, if valid, would eliminate the need for grace entirely: if the commands presuppose the ability, then conversion is a matter of the person's own effort, and grace is superfluous. The Erasmian position ended, Luther argued, not in the modest semi-Pelagianism it claimed to represent but in the full Pelagianism that even Erasmus was unwilling to embrace. If any human ability is the decisive factor in salvation, Pelagianism has won.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

Romans 1:16–17, NASB 1995

II. Erasmus' Position

The Weakened but Sufficient Will

A. The Structure of Erasmus' Argument

Erasmus' argument in *On the Freedom of the Will* is more theologically modest than Luther's polemical characterization sometimes suggests. Erasmus was not arguing for the full Pelagian position that the will is morally neutral and capable of choosing good without grace. He acknowledged the weakness and corruption of the will after the fall; he acknowledged the absolute necessity of divine grace for any meritorious act; and he denied that human beings could earn their way to heaven by their own moral effort. What he argued was the more qualified position that the will, though weakened, retains a “small power” (*exiguam vim*), a minimal but genuine capacity to cooperate with the grace that God offers, to apply itself toward salvation when grace makes this possible, and to provide the final, decisive assent that completes the saving transaction.

The core of Erasmus' argument was the hermeneutical principle that biblical commands presuppose human ability. When God commands the sinner to repent and believe, the command is a genuine invitation that presupposes the sinner's genuine capacity to comply. To deny this capacity is to make God a moral tyrant who commands what is impossible, a conclusion that Erasmus regarded as theologically untenable. The biblical language of exhortation, warning, and promise all presupposes that the human being addressed has some genuine capacity to respond, and this presupposition is sufficient to establish that the will, however weakened by the fall, is not so completely enslaved as Luther claimed.

Erasmus also appealed to the tradition of the church, particularly to the majority of the Greek fathers who had affirmed a genuine role for human free will in the saving transaction. He argued that the innovation belonged to Luther, not to Erasmus: it was Luther who was departing from the received tradition of the church by asserting the complete bondage of the will, and the burden of proof lay with the innovator to establish his departure from the tradition against the accumulated authority of the majority. Erasmus was not arguing that the tradition was infallible, he was too good a scholar for that, but that the weight of traditional consensus should caution against the confident assertion of a novel and extreme position on a question of such difficulty.

B. The Weakness of Erasmus' Position

Luther identified several decisive weaknesses in Erasmus' position that the Reformed tradition has consistently regarded as fatal to the free will argument. The first and most fundamental is the incoherence of the “small power” position. If the will retains even a minimal genuine capacity to cooperate with grace, then the decisive factor in any person's salvation is ultimately the exercise of that minimal capacity rather than the sovereign grace of God. The person who exercises her small power of compliance has done something the person who does not has not done, and the difference between them is ultimately the exercise of that small power. This makes the small power,

however small, the decisive factor in the saving transaction, and however minimal the boasting that results, it remains boasting: the saved person has done something the unsaved has not.

The second weakness is Erasmus' hermeneutical principle that commands presuppose ability. Luther argued that this principle is exegetically indefensible: the biblical commands do not presuppose ability; they reveal obligation. The law commands what God's holiness requires of the human creature, not what the fallen human creature is capable of. The purpose of the law, as Paul establishes in Romans 3:20, is not to specify what people can do but to give knowledge of sin, to reveal the obligation that the fallen creature cannot meet and thereby to drive the sinner to the only One who can meet it on her behalf. The commands do not prove the ability; they prove the need for a grace that supplies what the commands require but the sinner cannot produce.

Third, Erasmus' appeal to the majority of the tradition was, in Luther's judgment, an appeal to an authority that Scripture alone can override. The tradition had accumulated much error alongside much truth, and the test of any theological position must ultimately be its consistency with the clear teaching of Scripture rather than its conformity to the majority view of the fathers. Moreover, Luther challenged the accuracy of Erasmus' reading of the tradition: Augustine, the greatest of the Western fathers and the one whose doctrine of grace most directly shaped the Western church, had argued with unambiguous force for the complete bondage of the will and the sovereignty of grace in the later anti-Pelagian writings. The tradition was not as uniformly on Erasmus' side as he had claimed.

III. Luther's Central Thesis

The Beast, the Two Riders, and the Scripture's Testimony

A. The Two-Riders Metaphor

Luther's most memorable and most theologically penetrating contribution to the bondage-of-the-will debate is his central metaphor for the will's condition: "Man's will is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills. If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, nor may it seek out either; but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it." This metaphor captures the bondage doctrine with remarkable precision and with the kind of vivid clarity that made Luther one of the most effective communicators in the history of theology.

The beast metaphor is theologically precise in several dimensions. First, the beast is not inert; it moves, it acts, it goes in a definite direction. The will is not eliminated by its bondage; it functions genuinely and actively, producing genuine volitional acts in genuine directions. Second, the direction in which the beast moves is determined by its rider, not by its own neutral deliberation: there is no neutral will that might go in any direction depending on which rider it chooses; the will always moves in the direction its rider is directing it. Third, the beast cannot choose to which rider it will run: the initiative in determining the rider is the rider's, not the beast's. Fourth, when God rides the will, it moves willingly and genuinely toward God: the divine sovereignty in claiming the will does not produce an unwilling, externally compelled, puppet-like action; it produces a genuinely willing, genuine movement of the person toward God. The beast ridden by God goes where God wills, and goes genuinely.

The pastoral and theological implication of the metaphor is stark. The unregenerate person's will, ridden by Satan, goes where Satan directs, which is away from God, toward sin, toward self, toward the idols that the heart of Jeremiah 17:9 devises. This movement is genuine; the person genuinely wants what her rider is directing her toward. She is not forced to sin; she sins because she wants to. But she cannot want otherwise, because the rider on her will is directing her desires toward sin and away from God, and she has no capacity within herself to unseat this rider and replace him with another. Only the sovereign claim of God on the will, the Spirit's effectual calling, the divine work of regeneration that Luther is describing in the metaphor of God taking the reins, can produce the genuine movement toward God that salvation requires. And when God takes the reins, the movement is genuine: the regenerate person genuinely, freely, and willingly moves toward the God who has claimed her will as His own.

B. The Biblical Foundation of Luther's Argument

Luther's argument in *De Servo Arbitrio* is grounded in a sustained engagement with the relevant biblical texts, and he returns repeatedly to the texts that most directly establish the bondage of the will. John 8:34, "Every one who commits sin is the slave of sin", establishes the fundamental principle: the person who sins is not a free agent who has made a bad choice; she is a slave whose acts are the acts of a slave directed by the master of sin. Romans 6:17–20 develops the slavery theme in the context of the Christian's redemption: the person who has come to faith was formerly a slave of sin, but has been freed by the sovereign initiative of God who handed her over to the form of teaching that produced the obedience of faith. The passive character of the handing-over, done to the person, not by her, establishes the monergistic character of the liberation.

Romans 8:7–8 provides Luther's strongest exegetical support: "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (NASB 1995). The language of constitutive incapacity, "not even able to" and "cannot", is the language of bondage, not merely of disinclination. The flesh-minded person does not merely choose not to subject itself to God's law; it is constitutively unable to do so. And 2 Timothy 2:25–26 adds the dimension of divine sovereignty in the liberation: "if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will." The repentance is a divine grant; the escape is from a captivity; the coming to one's senses is from a condition of being held captive. Every element of the text reinforces Luther's two-riders metaphor: the person is in the devil's captivity until God sovereignly grants the repentance that produces the escape.

"For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

Philippians 2:13, NASB 1995

IV. Freedom and Ability

Calvin, Edwards, and the Philosophical Precision of the Reformed Doctrine

A. Calvin's Formulation: Necessarily But Not Compulsorily

John Calvin's contribution to the bondage-of-the-will doctrine adds the philosophical precision that Luther's powerful rhetoric sometimes obscured. Calvin's formulation in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (II.3.5) captures the doctrine with a lapidary economy that has served the Reformed tradition ever since: the unregenerate will is "necessarily, but not compulsorily" inclined toward evil. Two distinct affirmations in four Latin words: "necessarily" (the will cannot but sin, because its nature is constitutively directed toward sin) and "not compulsorily" (the will is not forced to sin by external power acting against an internal desire to do otherwise; it sins because it wants to, because its desires are formed by the sinful nature it bears).

Calvin's formulation is the key to understanding how the bondage of the will is compatible with genuine human freedom and genuine human responsibility. The sinner is genuinely responsible for her sin because she acts from her own desires without external compulsion: no one forces her to sin. But she is genuinely unable to choose God because her desires are constitutively directed away from God by the sinful nature she bears, and she cannot change the nature from which her desires flow by the exercise of the very will whose freedom is in question. The freedom is from external compulsion; the necessity is from internal constitution. Both are simultaneously true, and their simultaneous truth is the content of the Reformed compatibilism that preserves both the bondage of the will and the responsibility of the sinner.

The pastoral application of Calvin's formulation is significant. The sinner who is brought to genuine conviction of sin and genuine saving faith by the Spirit's effectual work does not experience the transition as external compulsion; she experiences it as the genuine desire of her own renewed heart. The regenerate person genuinely wants Christ; genuinely trusts God; genuinely desires holiness, not because she has been forced to want these things against her natural inclinations, but because the Spirit's regenerating work has renewed the nature from which her inclinations flow, so that her new natural inclination is toward the God whom her old natural inclination

had steadfastly resisted. The freedom is real; the bondage that preceded it was real; and the sovereign grace that addressed the bondage and created the freedom is the cause of both the liberation and the genuine freedom that the liberation produces.

B. Jonathan Edwards and the Will's Strongest Inclination

Jonathan Edwards' contribution to the bondage-of-the-will debate in his 1754 *Freedom of the Will* is the most philosophically rigorous defense of the Reformed doctrine in the history of American theology, and it remains one of the most impressive works of theological philosophy in the entire Christian tradition. Edwards' central thesis is both simple and far-reaching: the will always chooses in accordance with its strongest inclination or motive. That is, at any given moment of choice, the person will choose whatever appears to her as the greatest good, the most desirable option, the strongest pull on her desires. The will is not a neutral faculty that deliberates independently of the person's desires and then makes a choice that could have been otherwise; it is the expression of those desires in a specific act of choosing.

The implications of this thesis for the bondage-of-the-will doctrine are decisive. The unregenerate person's strongest inclination is always away from God and toward self, because her desires are formed by the sinful nature that original corruption has constituted. She always chooses according to her strongest inclination; her strongest inclination is always away from God; therefore she always chooses away from God. This is not compulsion (no external force makes her choose what she does not want to choose); it is the expression of what she genuinely wants. And she cannot want otherwise, not because an external force prevents her from wanting otherwise, but because the wanting is produced by a nature whose constitutive direction is away from God, and she has no capacity to change that nature by the exercise of the very will whose freedom is in question.

Edwards also provided the most compelling available treatment of the compatibility between genuine moral responsibility and the determined character of the will. He argued that moral responsibility requires only that a person act from her own desires, intentions, and character without external compulsion, not that she possess the libertarian ability to have done otherwise in identical circumstances. The person who lies, steals, or murders from her own desires is responsible for what she has done, even if those desires were themselves shaped by factors outside her control (including her fallen nature). The libertarian requirement that genuine freedom requires the ability to have done otherwise is, Edwards argued, self-defeating: a will that is genuinely undetermined by any prior cause, including the person's own character and desires, is not a free will but a random one, and random acts are less the expression of genuine freedom than acts that express the person's own desires consistently and reliably.

The Edwards contribution to the Hamartiology curriculum is specifically this: he provides the most philosophically precise account of why the bondage of the will is consistent with genuine moral responsibility, genuine freedom from external compulsion, and the absolute sovereignty of grace in the saving transaction. The person who is saved has genuinely chosen Christ, the choice is real, the desire is genuine, the faith is her own. And the decisive factor in the production of that genuine choice, genuine desire, and genuine faith is the sovereign work of the Spirit who renewed the nature from which the choosing, desiring, and believing flow. Both are simultaneously true, and their simultaneous truth is the content of the Reformed doctrine that both Luther's rhetoric and Edwards' philosophy, in their different ways, have established as exegetically grounded, philosophically coherent, and pastorally essential.

"God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will."

2 Timothy 2:25–26, NASB 1995

V. The Theological Stakes

Soli Deo Gloria and the Question of Whose Will Is Decisive

A. *Where Does Salvation's Glory Reside?*

Luther identified the ultimate theological stakes of the bondage-of-the-will debate with a clarity that cut through all the detailed exegetical and philosophical arguments to the central question: if the human will is free in the libertarian sense, if the decisive factor in any person's salvation is ultimately that person's own choice, made in response to universally available grace, then the person who makes the right choice has something to boast about before God. She is saved because she chose rightly; the person who is not saved chose wrongly; and the difference between them is their choice. The saved person has done something the unsaved person has not, and that something is the ultimate explanation for the difference in their eternal destinies.

Paul's specific statement in Ephesians 2:8–9, “by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast”, is the apostolic answer to this question. The specific purpose Paul states for the monergistic character of grace is the elimination of boasting: the grace must be “not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works” specifically so that “no one may boast.” The free will position, however modest its claim, introduces a basis for boasting that Paul specifically and intentionally eliminates. If the decisive factor is the person's own free choice, however enabled by grace, then the person can boast, with perfect justice, that she made the right choice when she could have made the wrong one. Erasmus' position, Luther argued, inevitably produces this boasting, however reluctantly.

The bondage of the will eliminates boasting entirely: the decisive factor in the regenerate person's faith is the sovereign work of the Spirit who renewed the nature from which the faith flowed; the decisive factor in the saving transaction is the monergistic grace of the God who “made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5) when we were dead, enslaved, and blind. The regenerate person did not choose Christ because she was wiser than the unregenerate person, more spiritually sensitive, or more willing to face the truth about herself; she chose Christ because the Spirit sovereignly renewed the nature that had been constitutively directed away from Christ, and the choice that followed was the genuine, free, and willing expression of the new nature the Spirit had created. The glory of the choice belongs to the Spirit who created the new nature, not to the person who expressed it.

B. *The Bondage Doctrine and the Certainty of Salvation*

Luther also identified a second, equally important theological stake in the bondage-of-the-will debate: the certainty of the believer's assurance of salvation. If the decisive factor in salvation is the human will's free choice, then the security of the believer's salvation depends ultimately on the stability of that free choice: the person who was saved by choosing rightly could, in principle, be lost by choosing wrongly in the future. The free will that converted can equally un-convert, and the assurance of final perseverance is unavailable to a theology that makes the human will the decisive factor.

The bondage doctrine, by contrast, grounds the believer's assurance not in the stability of her own free will but in the faithfulness of the sovereign God who rode the will to conversion and will ride it to final perseverance. The God who said “I will give you a new heart” (Ezekiel 36:26) is the God whose gifts and callings are irrevocable (Romans 11:29); the Spirit who regenerated the will and created the faith is the Spirit who has sealed the believer for the day of redemption (Ephesians 4:30); and the golden chain of Romans 8:29–30, foreknown, predestined, called, justified, glorified, runs unbroken from eternity past to eternity future, with no link in the chain dependent on the stability of the human free will for its holding. The assurance is the assurance of those who know that their salvation is “wholly of God” (as Luther put it), and the God who does not change is the most stable possible foundation for the assurance that the bondage doctrine grounds.

This is why Luther insisted that the bondage of the will, far from being a despairing doctrine, is actually the most joy-producing doctrine available to the believer. The person who knows that her salvation depends on her own free will lives in perpetual uncertainty: her will might turn away tomorrow. The person who knows that her salvation depends on the sovereign faithfulness of the God who gave her the will to believe lives in the settled

assurance of Romans 8:38–39: “for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The assurance is not the assurance of the person who has made a sufficiently strong and stable choice; it is the assurance of the person who has been chosen by the One whose choices are as eternal as His character.

VI. Pastoral and Doxological Implications

What the Bondage Doctrine Does for the Soul and the Church

A. For Prayer: The Confidence of Knowing that God Does What We Cannot

The bondage-of-the-will doctrine produces the most confident and most specific intercessory prayer available in the entire Christian theological vocabulary. The person who prays for the lost under a free-will theology prays with a fundamental uncertainty: she is asking God to provide the grace that makes conversion possible, but the decisive factor, the person’s own free choice, is outside God’s direct control. The most she can ask for is favorable circumstances, persuasive proclamation, and the removal of obstacles. But the decisive act remains the person’s own, and prayer cannot directly address the decisive act.

The person who prays under the bondage-of-the-will theology prays with a very different confidence: she is asking the omnipotent God to do the specific thing that only He can do, to ride the will of the specific person for whom she is praying, to claim the enslaved will from its current rider (Satan, sin, and the world), to give the repentance that is a divine grant (2 Timothy 2:25), to open the heart as He opened Lydia’s (Acts 16:14), to call from death to life as He called Lazarus from the tomb (John 11:43). This is a prayer that specifically addresses the decisive factor in conversion, because the decisive factor, the Spirit’s sovereign work, is precisely what the believer is asking God to exercise. The prayer is not a request for favorable circumstances supplementing a human decision; it is a petition to the sovereign God to do the sovereign thing that will produce the human decision as its genuine but not independent fruit.

B. For Preaching: The Freedom of the Herald Who Trusts the Sovereign God

The bondage-of-the-will doctrine produces in the faithful preacher a specific combination of freedom and urgency that no other theological conviction can replicate. The freedom is freedom from the anxiety of believing that the outcome of the proclamation depends primarily on the quality of the preacher’s technique, the force of her personality, or the favorability of the circumstances. The preacher who understands the bondage of the will knows that no amount of eloquence, emotional impact, or persuasive skill can produce in the hearers the sovereign work of the Spirit that alone can ride the enslaved will to faith. She is not the decisive factor; the Spirit is. And this knowledge liberates her to preach with undistracted faithfulness to the text, without the frantic effort to produce by human technique what only sovereign grace can produce.

The urgency is equally characteristic and equally important. The Spirit works through the means of the proclaimed Word, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17, NASB 1995), and without the faithful proclamation of the gospel, the Spirit has not been given the instrument through which He ordinarily works. Every occasion for the proclamation of the gospel is therefore an occasion for the Spirit to work, and every occasion missed is an occasion when the Spirit’s ordinary instrument has been withheld from the souls who need it. The bondage of the will makes the proclamation of the gospel more urgent, not less: because salvation depends entirely on sovereign grace, and because sovereign grace works ordinarily through the means of the proclaimed Word, the faithful, consistent, theologically precise proclamation of the gospel is the most important act of ministry available to the church.

C. For the Believer: The Wonder of a Will That Was Made Free

The deepest pastoral gift of the bondage-of-the-will doctrine to the individual believer is the specific, personal, wonder-producing recognition of what she has been given. The reformed will, the will that now genuinely desires God, that genuinely trusts Christ, that genuinely pursues holiness, is not the achievement of a free decision made

by a neutral will in a favorable moment. It is the gift of the sovereign Spirit who rode the enslaved will to faith, who gave the repentance that is a divine grant, who opened the heart that was constitutively closed to the gospel, and who has been empowering the genuine willing and working of the Christian life ever since (Philippians 2:13).

This recognition produces the specific humility and the specific wonder that the Reformation's *solus Deo gloria* is designed to express. The believer who knows the bondage doctrine does not look at the unregenerate person around her and thank God that she is not like that person because she made a better choice; she looks at the unregenerate person and recognizes her own former condition, and gives all the credit for the difference to the God whose Spirit rode her enslaved will to faith before she had any inclination to bring it there herself. The doxology of Romans 11:33–36 is the only adequate response: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!... For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." The glory belongs to the Rider, not to the beast.

"So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

Romans 9:16, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
De Servo Arbitrio	Latin: “On the Bondage of the Will,” the title of Martin Luther’s 1525 response to Erasmus of Rotterdam’s 1524 treatise <i>Diatribes seu Collatio de Libero Arbitrio</i> (“On Free Will”). Luther considered <i>De Servo Arbitrio</i> his most important theological work, more significant than even the Ninety-Five Theses, because it addressed the doctrinal question most foundational to the entire Reformation: whether the decisive factor in a sinner’s salvation is the sovereign grace of God or the exercise of human free will. Luther argued with sustained exegetical and theological force that the will of the unregenerate person is enslaved to sin and cannot turn to God apart from the sovereign, regenerating work of the Spirit. <i>De Servo Arbitrio</i> is, along with Calvin’s <i>Institutes</i> and Jonathan Edwards’ <i>Freedom of the Will</i> , one of the three most important treatments of the bondage of the will in the history of Protestant theology.
De Libero Arbitrio (Erasmus)	Latin: “On Free Will,” the 1524 treatise by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466–1536) in which the most learned humanist scholar of the age argued against Luther’s doctrine of the bondage of the will. Erasmus argued that the human will, though weakened by the fall, retains a genuine capacity to cooperate with divine grace in the work of salvation, a position that, while carefully qualified to acknowledge the necessity of grace, nonetheless made the human will a co-efficient cause of the saving transaction. Erasmus was primarily concerned to defend what he regarded as the morally coherent picture of a God who holds human beings accountable for moral choices they are genuinely capable of making or not making. Luther responded that Erasmus had misread Scripture, misunderstood grace, and ultimately given the glory of salvation to the human will rather than to the sovereign God.
The Two Riders (Luther’s Metaphor)	Martin Luther’s central metaphor in <i>De Servo Arbitrio</i> for the condition of the human will in its enslaved state: “Man’s will is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills. If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, nor may it seek out either; but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it.” The metaphor captures several dimensions of the bondage-of-the-will doctrine: (1) the will is not neutral between two possible riders but is always under the direction of one or the other; (2) the will acts according to its rider’s direction without external compulsion, the beast is not dragged but goes willingly; (3) the transition from Satan’s direction to God’s direction is not the will’s own initiative but the result of the sovereign divine claim on the will through effectual grace; and (4) the will’s activity is genuine, it is a real beast going a real direction, even though the decisive factor in which direction it goes is the rider rather than the beast.
Compatibilist Freedom	The philosophical account of freedom that holds that genuine human freedom (the ability to act according to one’s own desires and nature without external compulsion) is compatible with the sovereign determination of all things by God, including the direction of the will by a nature that is itself shaped by prior causes including divine grace. On the compatibilist account, a person is genuinely free when she acts from her own desires without external coercion, even if those desires are themselves the product of factors outside her control (including her God-given nature, her fallen corruption, or the Spirit’s regenerating work). Compatibilism is the philosophical framework within which the Reformed doctrines of total inability, effectual calling, and irresistible grace can be affirmed consistently with genuine human freedom and genuine human responsibility. The Reformers did not use the term “compatibilism” (it belongs to later analytic philosophy) but their doctrine of “necessarily but not compulsorily” (Calvin) and Edwards’ analysis of the will as always choosing according to its strongest inclination reflect the same philosophical framework.
Libertarian Free Will	The philosophical account of freedom that holds that a genuinely free choice requires the ability to have done otherwise in identical circumstances, that is, the choice must not be determined by any prior cause, including the chooser’s own nature, desires, or character. On

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	the libertarian view, a truly free will must be genuinely undetermined between at least two possible choices, so that the same person in the same circumstances could have chosen differently. Libertarian free will is incompatible with the Reformed doctrine of total inability (which holds that the unregenerate will is constitutively directed toward sin and cannot genuinely choose God) and with the Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace (which holds that the elect will infallibly come to faith through the Spirit's sovereign effectual calling). Arminian soteriology is committed to a form of libertarian free will because it makes the decisive factor in salvation the human will's free response to universally available prevenient grace, and a truly decisive human choice requires that the person could have chosen otherwise.
Necessarily But Not Compulsorily	Calvin's precise formulation of the bondage of the will in the Institutes of the Christian Religion (II.3.5): the unregenerate will is necessarily inclined toward sin, it cannot but sin in its unregenerate state, but it is not compulsorily so, in the sense of being forced by external power to sin against an internal desire to do otherwise. The will of the fallen person sins necessarily because its nature is constitutively directed toward sin; but it is not compelled in the sense of doing what it does not want to do. The fallen person sins because she wants to sin, and the willing is genuine. What she cannot do is genuinely want the things of God, because her nature does not generate that desire. Calvin's formulation preserves both dimensions: the necessity (she cannot choose otherwise than her nature directs) and the genuineness (she acts according to her own desires without external constraint), establishing that the necessity of sinning is compatible with the genuineness of the sinning and therefore with genuine moral accountability.
Jonathan Edwards and the Freedom of the Will	Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the greatest theologian of colonial America and one of the most formidable philosophical theologians in the history of Reformed Christianity, published A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame in 1754. Edwards argued with detailed philosophical precision that the will always chooses in accordance with its strongest inclination or motive, that “the will is as the greatest apparent good is.” Since the unregenerate will's strongest inclination is always toward self and sin (because original corruption has constitutively directed its desires away from God), the unregenerate person always chooses sin, not because she is externally compelled to but because her desires are reliably oriented in that direction. Edwards also argued that genuine moral responsibility requires only that the person acts from her own desires without external compulsion, not that she possess the libertarian ability to have done otherwise, thereby grounding moral accountability within a compatibilist framework.
Freedom and Ability	The crucial distinction that the Reformers and the Reformed tradition have consistently drawn between two different senses of freedom: freedom as the absence of external compulsion (the person acts from her own desires) and freedom as the presence of genuine alternative possibilities (the person could have chosen otherwise). The first sense, freedom from external compulsion, is what the Reformed tradition affirms the unregenerate person possesses: no one forces her to sin; she sins because she wants to. The second sense, the ability to choose genuinely differently, is what the Reformed tradition denies the unregenerate person possesses: her will is bound by a nature that always directs her toward sin, and she cannot genuinely choose God apart from the sovereign regenerating work of the Spirit. The practical implication of the distinction is that the unregenerate person is genuinely free (in the first sense) and genuinely responsible (because she acts from her own desires) while being genuinely unable (in the second sense) to choose God, a combination that the compatibilist framework preserves and the libertarian framework cannot.
Philippians 2:13 and the Working Will	Paul's statement in Philippians 2:13, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (NASB 1995), is the New Testament's most direct statement of the theological principle that the divine working of the will does not eliminate but rather

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	creates and empowers genuine human willing. God works the willing; the believer genuinely wills; the two activities are not in competition but are simultaneously operative. This verse establishes the compatibility of divine sovereign working and genuine human willing, the same compatibility that the bondage-of-the-will doctrine requires: God's sovereign act of regeneration does not produce a puppet but a genuinely new person whose new desires are genuinely her own while being entirely the product of the prior divine work that created them. The Reformed tradition's affirmation of "necessarily but not compulsorily" finds its positive expression in this verse: the freedom and the necessity are simultaneously real because God works the willing that the person genuinely wills.
The Theological Stakes	The bondage-of-the-will debate between Luther and Erasmus was not merely a technical theological dispute about the mechanics of the human will; it was a dispute about where the decisive factor in salvation lies and therefore about who receives the credit and the glory for every conversion. Luther understood with great clarity that if the will is free in the libertarian sense, if the decisive factor in any person's conversion is ultimately that person's own choice, exercised in response to universally available grace, then the person who makes the right choice has something to boast about, and the glory of salvation is shared between God and the converting person. The bondage of the will, by contrast, removes every basis for human boasting: if the converting person's will was enslaved to sin until the Spirit's sovereign regenerating work freed it, then the entire credit for the conversion belongs to God. The soli Deo gloria of the Reformation is not merely a theological position; it is the specific doxological consequence of the bondage-of-the-will doctrine, and Luther recognized this connection with a clarity that gave the bondage doctrine its supreme importance in his theological reckoning.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that Luther was right to identify the bondage-of-the-will question as the most important theological question of the Reformation and, in a significant sense, the most important theological question in the entire understanding of salvation. The answer to this question determines where the glory of every conversion resides: with the sovereign God who rode the enslaved will to faith, or with the free human being who made the right choice in the decisive moment. The Reformation's *solus Deo gloria*, to God alone be the glory, is not compatible with a free-will theology that makes the human choice the decisive factor in salvation, because a decisive human choice creates a proportional basis for human boasting that Paul's Ephesians 2:8–9 specifically and intentionally eliminates.

We must also believe that Calvin's formulation, necessarily but not compulsorily, captures the precise truth that Luther's rhetoric establishes and Edwards' philosophy defends: the will's bondage is consistent with genuine freedom from external compulsion, genuine moral responsibility, and genuine personal faith. The bondage of the will does not produce robots or puppets; it produces enslaved sinners who are genuinely responsible for the sins their enslaved nature directs, and regenerated saints who genuinely and freely believe in the Christ whose Spirit has freed their enslaved wills. Both the bondage and the freedom are real; both are simultaneously maintained without contradiction; and the sovereign grace that addresses the bondage to produce the freedom is the specific subject of the church's most profound and most personal doxology.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The doctrine of the bondage of the will should produce in the believing heart a specific and searching examination: do I genuinely believe that the decisive factor in my own conversion was the sovereign work of the Spirit rather than the exercise of my own will? If so, do I live in the humility and wonder that belief requires? Or have I subtly reinstated a free-will theology in my emotional and devotional life, subtly congratulating myself for having made a better choice than those around me who have not yet believed? The bondage doctrine is not merely a theological position to be held; it is a personal conviction to be inhabited, one that should produce in the believer the specific, searching, self-examining humility of one who knows that all the difference between her condition and the condition of the unregenerate person around her is the sovereign grace of the God who rode her enslaved will to faith.

Desire, above all, the kind of wonder-filled, grace-saturated gratitude that the bondage doctrine specifically and uniquely generates: the gratitude of the person who knows that her faith was not her own achievement but the gift of the God who gave what He commanded, who worked the willing before she willed (Philippians 2:13), who opened the heart before she sought (Acts 16:14), and who in the fullness of time will complete what He has begun (Philippians 1:6) until the will that was enslaved, then freed, is finally and permanently conformed to the image of the Son. This is the assurance that the bondage doctrine provides: not the assurance of a stable free will, but the assurance of the God who does not change, whose gifts and callings are irrevocable, and in whose unfailing faithfulness the entire security of the believer's salvation rests.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read the relevant portions of Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* (available in English translation as *The Bondage of the Will*), particularly the introductory sections where Luther explains why this question is the hinge of the entire Reformation, and the central section where he develops the two-riders metaphor. Luther writes as a pastor and a preacher as much as a theologian, and his treatment of the bondage-of-the-will question has a fire and a pastoral urgency that no summary of his position can fully convey. Read it in the awareness that Luther regarded this as the most important work of his life, more significant than the Ninety-Five Theses, because it addressed the question most foundational to the gospel itself.
- Study the three primary texts that the lesson identifies as Luther's biblical foundation for the bondage of the will: John 8:34–36 (every one who commits sin is the slave of sin), Romans 8:7–8 (the mind set on the

flesh is not even able to subject itself to God's law), and 2 Timothy 2:25–26 (God may perhaps grant repentance, from captivity). For each text, ask: does the language describe disinclination (the will could choose otherwise but does not) or constitutional incapacity (the will is constitutively unable to choose otherwise)? The answer in each case, carefully examined, establishes the specific linguistic force of the biblical bondage doctrine.

- Apply the two-riders metaphor to your pastoral ministry. Think of specific persons in your congregation or sphere of influence who are currently riding with Satan, whose will is directed away from God by the enslavement of their fallen nature. What does the two-riders metaphor equip you to pray for them? Not merely for favorable circumstances or more persuasive proclamation, but for the specific sovereign act of the God who must come and take the reins, who must grant the repentance (2 Timothy 2:25), open the heart (Acts 16:14), and call from the tomb (John 11:43). These are specific prayers made possible by a specific theological conviction; pray them specifically and persistently.
- Study Jonathan Edwards' argument in the Freedom of the Will (sections I.1–5 and IV.1–5 are the most accessible entry points) for the claim that the will always chooses according to its strongest inclination. Apply the argument to the specific bondage-of-the-will question: if the unregenerate will always chooses according to its strongest inclination, and if the unregenerate will's strongest inclination is always away from God (because original corruption has constitutively directed its desires in that direction), then what specifically is required for the will to genuinely choose God? What must change in the will before its strongest inclination can be directed toward God? And what is the specific name for the sovereign divine act that changes the will's strongest inclination, the act that corresponds to God's riding the will in Luther's metaphor?
- Reflect on the relationship between the bondage-of-the-will doctrine and the assurance of salvation. If the decisive factor in your salvation was the sovereign work of the Spirit rather than the exercise of your own free will, what is the foundation of your assurance? Is it the stability of your own faith (which wavers) or the faithfulness of the God who gave the faith (who does not change)? Are there moments in your spiritual life when your assurance seems to fluctuate with the quality of your performance? If so, how does the bondage doctrine, which grounds assurance in the sovereign, irrevocable gift of the God who gave faith when you could not generate it, provide a more stable foundation for assurance than a free-will theology's grounding of assurance in the continued exercise of the right choice?

Key Texts: *John 8:34–36; Romans 6:17–20; 8:7–8; 9:16; 2 Timothy 2:25–26; Philippians 2:13; John 1:12–13; Ephesians 2:8–9; Acts 16:14; Romans 10:17; Romans 11:33–36*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, where would you have located yourself on the free-will-versus-bondage-of-the-will spectrum? Did you tend toward the Erasmian position (the will is weakened but retains a genuine capacity to cooperate with grace), the Lutheran-Reformed position (the will is enslaved to sin and cannot choose God apart from sovereign effectual grace), or somewhere in between? What was the most important factor in your prior position, and how has the lesson's development of the theological stakes altered, confirmed, or challenged that prior positioning?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read John 8:31–36 in its full context. Luther cites verse 34's declaration that "Every one who commits sin is the slave of sin" as foundational for the bondage doctrine. What is the specific force of the word "slave" (*doulos*) in this context, does it describe the condition of a person who is externally compelled to sin against her will, or of a person whose will itself is directed toward sin by a constitutive bondage? How does verse 36 ("if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed") establish the character of the liberation that addresses the bondage, is it the liberation of a will that was merely constrained, or the liberation of a will whose very nature has been changed?
3. Read Romans 8:5–8 and identify the specific language of incapacity in verses 7–8. What are the four statements Paul makes about the flesh-minded person's relationship to God and God's law (hostile toward God; does not subject itself to God's law; not even able to do so; cannot please God)? How does the progression from behavioral description to grammatical incapacity (not even able to; cannot) establish the specific force of the bondage doctrine? And how does the contrast between "in the flesh" (verse 8) and "in the Spirit" (verse 9) establish the two-riders structure, that the will is always under the direction of one rider or another?
4. Read 2 Timothy 2:24–26 carefully. What is the character of the repentance described in verse 25, is it something the person produces or something God grants? What is the description of the person's prior condition in verse 26 (held captive, doing the devil's will)? How does Luther's two-riders metaphor correspond to the captive-in-the-devil's-will description of verse 26? And what does the "perhaps" in verse 25 ("God may perhaps grant them repentance") suggest about the sovereign character of the repentance, is it universally guaranteed, or is it a sovereign divine act whose bestowal is at the divine discretion?
5. Read Philippians 2:12–13 and analyze the relationship between the human working (verse 12: "work out your salvation with fear and trembling") and the divine working (verse 13: "for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure"). What is the specific relationship between God's working and the human willing, are they competitive (God's working replaces human willing) or complementary (God's working produces and empowers human willing)? How does the phrase "both to will and to work" (both the willing and the working) establish the depth of the divine working that the bondage doctrine requires, not merely working but working the very willing?
6. Read Romans 9:14–21 in the context of Paul's argument about divine election in Romans 9–11. What is the specific argument of verse 16 ("So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy")? How does the double negation ("not... the man who wills... not... the man who runs") establish the comprehensive exclusion of the human will and the human effort from the decisive factor in salvation? And how does the inclusion of "the man who wills" (specifically naming the human will) alongside "the man who runs" (the human effort) establish that even the sincere, genuine, willing response of the person is not the decisive factor in the saving transaction?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that Erasmus' hermeneutical principle, that biblical commands presuppose human ability, is fatally flawed, and that Luther's response, that biblical commands reveal obligation rather than

presupposing ability, is exegetically superior. Evaluate this argument. Is Luther's response to the commands-presuppose-ability principle convincing? Does the Reformed tradition have a satisfying account of why God commands what the unregenerate person cannot do? Is the purpose of the law exclusively diagnostic (revealing the obligation the fallen person cannot meet), or does the law have other purposes that complicate this simple account?

8. Calvin's formulation of the bondage doctrine as "necessarily but not compulsorily" is the lesson's proposed resolution of the apparent tension between the will's bondage and genuine human freedom. Evaluate the cogency of this formulation. Does the distinction between "necessarily" and "not compulsorily" successfully preserve both the bondage (the will cannot choose God) and the freedom (the will acts from its own desires without external compulsion)? Is there a meaningful sense in which a person is genuinely free if the desires from which her acts flow are themselves the product of a fallen nature she did not choose and cannot change?
9. Jonathan Edwards' argument that the will always chooses according to its strongest inclination has been criticized on the grounds that it makes moral choices entirely determined by prior causes (the person's nature, desires, and character) and therefore eliminates the possibility of genuine moral novelty or self-creation. Evaluate this criticism. Does Edwards' account of the will as always choosing according to its strongest inclination lead to a hard determinism that is incompatible with genuine moral agency? Or does Edwards' definition of freedom as acting from one's own desires without external compulsion provide an adequate account of genuine moral agency within a compatibilist framework?
10. Luther identifies two theological stakes in the bondage-of-the-will debate: the question of where the glory of conversion resides (with God or with the converting person's free choice) and the question of the certainty of the believer's assurance (grounded in the sovereignty of God or in the stability of the human will). Evaluate the second stake. Does the bondage doctrine genuinely provide a more stable foundation for assurance than a free-will theology? Is it possible for an Arminian theology to provide genuine assurance of salvation despite its commitment to the human will as the decisive factor? And what is the specific difference between the assurance available to the bondage-of-the-will believer and the assurance available to the free-will believer?
11. The lesson argues that the Luther-Erasmus debate is not merely an antiquarian historical controversy but the most theologically foundational question in the entire Christian understanding of salvation. Evaluate this claim. Is the bondage-of-the-will question genuinely as foundational as Luther claimed? Are there other doctrinal questions, the divinity of Christ, the resurrection, the inspiration of Scripture, that are equally or more foundational? And is it possible for a free-will theology to maintain the full force of the Reformation's *sola gratia* (grace alone) and *solus Deo gloria* (glory to God alone), or does the free-will position inevitably compromise these Reformation affirmations?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. Luther's two-riders metaphor establishes that the unregenerate will is always under the direction of one rider or another, and that the transition from Satan's direction to God's direction requires the sovereign divine claim on the will through effectual grace. Apply this metaphor to your understanding of your own conversion. Who was riding your will before the Spirit's effectual calling? What was the direction in which your will was reliably going? And what specifically was the divine act that changed the rider, was it the favorable circumstances, the persuasive presentation of the gospel, or the sovereign claim of the Spirit on a will that was enslaved and could not redirect itself?
13. The lesson argues that the bondage doctrine produces the most confident and most specific intercessory prayer available in the Christian theological vocabulary, because it asks the omnipotent God to do the specific thing that only He can do. Evaluate your own intercessory prayer for the lost in light of this claim. Is your prayer primarily requesting favorable circumstances and persuasive proclamation (which presupposes that the decisive factor is the person's own free will in favorable conditions), or is it specifically requesting the sovereign Spirit's act of riding the enslaved will (which presupposes that the decisive factor is the Spirit's

sovereign effectual calling)? The difference between these two prayer strategies reflects the theological difference between the free-will and bondage-of-the-will positions.

14. The Erasmian position, that the will retains a small but genuine capacity to cooperate with grace, is not merely an abstract theological position but an attitude that many Christians hold functionally, even if they would not articulate it in these terms. In what specific ways might a subtle free-will theology express itself in the practical Christian life: in the way one evaluates one's own conversion, in the way one talks about becoming a Christian, in the way one prays for the lost, or in the basis on which one grounds one's own assurance? Identify the specific form that functional semi-Pelagianism most commonly takes in the evangelical culture you inhabit, and identify the specific bondage-of-the-will conviction that would most directly address it.
15. The lesson connects the bondage-of-the-will doctrine to the certainty of the believer's assurance: since the decisive factor in my salvation was the sovereign work of the Spirit rather than the stability of my own free will, my assurance is grounded in the faithfulness of the God who gave me the faith I could not generate rather than in the continued exercise of the will whose freedom is not libertarian. Assess your own assurance in light of this connection. Is your assurance most vulnerable to fluctuation when your own faith seems weak, your own commitment seems wavering, or your own obedience is inconsistent? If so, how does the bondage doctrine's grounding of assurance in the sovereign faithfulness of God, rather than in the stability of the human free will, address that specific vulnerability?
16. Jonathan Edwards argued that the will always chooses according to its strongest inclination. If this is true of the regenerate believer as well as the unregenerate sinner, what are the implications for the practice of spiritual discipline, Bible reading, prayer, corporate worship, and the other means of grace? If the will chooses according to its strongest inclination, and if the goal of sanctification is the progressive conformity of the will's inclinations to the holiness of God, then the means of grace are the specific instruments by which the Holy Spirit progressively reshapes the will's strongest inclinations. How does this understanding of the means of grace as the Spirit's specific instrument for reshaping the will's inclinations change the way you approach and practice the means of grace in your own spiritual life?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's time of prayer with Romans 9:16: "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." Read the verse slowly and allow the comprehensive exclusion of the human will ("not the man who wills") and the human effort ("not the man who runs") from the decisive factor in salvation to settle with its full weight. Then read Ephesians 2:8–9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." The double negation ("not of yourselves," "not as a result of works") and the specific purpose clause ("so that no one may boast") together establish the theological foundation of the prayer you are about to pray: the salvation was not of you, not of your will, not of your works, and the specific purpose of this arrangement was to ensure that the glory remains entirely with God. Pray in the awareness that you are speaking to the God whose sovereignty over the will is the specific ground of all your confidence, all your humility, and all your doxological wonder.

Pray in the structure of Luther's two-riders metaphor, moving through three dimensions of the bondage and liberation of the will. Begin with gratitude for the liberation: that the God who rides the will to faith did ride your will to faith, that the enslaved will you brought to the gospel was claimed by the sovereign Spirit before you had any inclination to bring it to Christ, that the faith you now possess was not generated by your own neutral, libertarian free choice but was the gift of the God who "works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). Receive this gratitude as the personal, specific, wonder-producing application of Luther's insight: God rode the beast, and the beast went where God willed, and the going was genuine, willing, and free, because God had made it so. Then pray with urgency for the unsaved: naming specifically the persons whose wills are currently ridden by Satan, whose directions are currently away from God, and asking the same God who rode your will to take the reins of their wills by His sovereign, effectual, unstoppable grace. Name them. Ask specifically. Trust the omnipotent Rider to do what no human evangelism can accomplish by its own power: to claim the enslaved will from its current rider and redirect it toward the God who made it. Finally, pray with confidence for the perseverance of the saints, for yourself and for those in your care whose wills, once claimed by the sovereign Rider, are now genuinely and freely going where God wills. The assurance is grounded not in the stability of the beast but in the faithfulness of the Rider, and the Rider does not change.

Pray together in three directions for the application of this lesson's theological content. First, for theological clarity in your own ministry: that you would preach, teach, counsel, and pray in a way that is consistently consistent with the bondage-of-the-will doctrine, that you would never subtly reinstate a free-will theology by presenting the gospel in terms that suggest the decisive factor is the hearer's wise choice, never speak of conversion in terms that credit the convert rather than the sovereign Spirit, and never ground your evangelistic urgency in the anxiety of a theology that believes human technique is the decisive factor rather than in the confidence of a theology that believes the Spirit's sovereign work is the decisive factor and that the proclaimed Word is the specific instrument through which that sovereign work ordinarily operates. Second, for the members of your congregation who are most vulnerable to the subtle semi-Pelagianism of their cultural context: who have been formed by an evangelical culture that has largely adopted the language of decision, choice, and free will as the primary framework for understanding conversion, and who may not be aware of the theological stakes of that formation. Pray that the careful, precise, theologically grounded teaching of the bondage-of-the-will doctrine would free these members from the subtle anxiety of a theology that grounds their assurance in their own continuing right choices and give them the settled, sober, wonder-filled assurance of a theology that grounds it in the sovereign faithfulness of the God who rode their wills to faith and who will not let go. Third, for the broader church: that the doctrinal heritage of the Reformation, the bondage of the will, *sola gratia*, *solus Deo gloria*, would not be lost in the accommodation to contemporary culture's individualist, free-will theology, but would be recovered, taught, and preached with the same clarity and urgency with which Luther recognized its foundational importance.

Close with the doxology of Romans 11:33–36 as the appropriate and inevitable doxological conclusion of the bondage-of-the-will doctrine: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" The unsearchable judgment is the judgment of the God who chose to ride the enslaved wills of specific sinners to faith, who did so not on the basis of foreseen free

choices but on the basis of His own sovereign, inscrutable, mercy-driven will. “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?” Who told God which wills to ride? No one: the sovereign choice was God’s, the grace was God’s, the effectual calling was God’s, and the faith that followed was the genuine expression of a will that God had made willing. “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.” The enslaved will was His to claim; the sovereign grace was His to give; the genuine faith that followed was from Him, through Him, and to Him. “To Him be the glory forever. Amen.” This is the doxological destination of the bondage-of-the-will doctrine, the place where Luther was standing when he called De Servo Arbitrio his most important work and refused to retract a word of it at the Diet of Worms. To God alone be the glory.

“So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy... For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 9:16; 11:36, NASB 1995

Key Texts: John 8:34–36; Romans 6:17–20; 8:5–8; 9:14–21; Romans 11:33–36; 2 Timothy 2:24–26; Philippians 2:12–13; John 1:12–13; Ephesians 2:8–9; Acts 16:14; Romans 10:17

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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