



MONERGISM

**MAN'S FALLEN CONDITION
FREE OR BOUND?
JOHN CALVIN**



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Preface

In his very helpful book, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, John Calvin stated that when people talk about what we want and how we decide things (our will) there are four expressions regarding the will which differ from one another:

“...namely that the will is **free, bound, self-determined, or coerced**. People generally understand a **free will** to be one which has in its power to choose good or evil ...[But] There can be no such thing as a **coerced** will, since the two ideas are contradictory. But our responsibility as teachers is to say what it means, so that it may be understood what coercion is. Therefore we describe [as **coerced**] the will which does not incline this way or that of its own accord or by an internal movement of decision, but is forcibly driven by an external impulse. We say that it is **self-determined** when of itself it directs itself in the direction in which it is led, when it is not taken by force or dragged unwillingly. A **bound will**, finally, is one which because of its corruptness is held captive under the authority of its evil desires, so that it can choose nothing but evil, even if it does so of its own accord and gladly, without being driven by any external impulse.

According to these definitions we allow that man has choice and that it is self-determined, so that if he does anything evil, it should be imputed to him and to his own voluntary choosing. We do away with **coercion** and force, because this contradicts the nature of the will and cannot coexist with it. We deny that choice is **free**, because through man's innate wickedness it is of **necessity** driven to what is evil and cannot seek anything but evil. **And from this it is possible to deduce what a great difference there is between necessity and coercion.** For we do not say that man is dragged

unwillingly into sinning, but that because his will is corrupt he is held captive under the yoke of sin and therefore of necessity will in an evil way. For where there is bondage, there is necessity. But it makes a great difference whether the bondage is voluntary or coerced. We locate the necessity to sin precisely in corruption of the will, from which follows that it is self-determined.

How Far Does Man's Freedom Extend?

Having recognized how sin's dominion over Adam subjected all of humanity to servitude, we must now determine whether we remain devoid of any freedom under this captivity or whether we possess a degree of freedom and, if so, to what extent. To navigate this question, we must establish the goal towards which we are working. To ascertain this goal, we must weigh the dangers on either side. On one hand, if individuals are stripped of all good and informed that their personal ability to do good is lacking, they may easily become apathetic. On the other hand, granting them any degree of capability could inflate them with unfounded confidence, diverting honor from God. To avoid this paradox, we must adhere to this guideline: while acknowledging their inherent inability, individuals should be prompted to desire the goodness and freedom that elude them. This desire should urge them forward even more ardently than if they believed they possessed boundless power. The significance of this second point cannot be overstated, as it exposes human negligence and indolence.

As for the first point—revealing humanity's wretched condition—some individuals display more hesitation than is warranted. While it is essential not to diminish individuals by attributing to them less than they possess, it is equally crucial to dispel false vanity. If they

were wrong to exalt themselves when graced with divine blessings, how much more fitting it is for them to humble themselves now, having fallen from that state of excellence to one of extreme degradation. Reflect on this: when humanity was elevated to the pinnacle of honor, Scripture merely attributes to them the creation in God's image [Genesis 1:26–27]. This implies that their blessedness was not intrinsic, but stemmed from their participation in God. What remains for them now? Stripped of all glory, they should acknowledge God. In their state of destitution, they are now better positioned to acknowledge God's gentleness and generosity, which they failed to discern when basking in the riches of His grace. Since they failed to glorify Him through the acknowledgment of His blessings, let them now glorify Him through confession of their woeful state.

Furthermore, relinquishing all pretense of wisdom and power is as beneficial as it is necessary to uphold God's glory. Those who ascribe excessive power to humanity inadvertently blaspheme God. Encouraging individuals to rely on their own strength, which is as fragile as a reed that promptly snaps, leads them to eventual downfall. Indeed, comparing human strength to a reed is overly generous, as all human strength is but smoke. Thus, the repeated assertion by St. Augustine holds true: "Those who claim that we possess free will undermine it rather than establish it." It is imperative to establish this foundation, despite the apprehensions of some who find the notion of diminishing human power and exalting God's strength unsettling and perilous. Ultimately, we shall discern the value and significance of this principle, one that forms the bedrock of our faith.

Philosophical Theories of the Will

To explore human faculties, we shall begin by discerning them in the simplest manner, without exploring the intricacies of philosophical debates. Although Plato's assertion of five senses functioning as instruments for the common sense appears reasonable, we do not need to be encumbered by these intricate details. It is sufficient to comprehend that within the soul, three cognitive powers exist: reason, understanding, and imagination. Corresponding to these are three desires: will, anger, and concupiscence. However, we shall refrain from looking deeper into these matters due to the potential for confusion and limited practical applicability.

We may explore further distinctions, such as those proposed by Aristotle, who delineates parts of the soul guided by reason and even those that partake in reason. He also identifies three fundamental sources from which all human actions stem: senses, understanding, and desire. Yet, for the sake of comprehension accessible to all, let us employ a simpler language, devoid of philosophical complexity. Philosophers, when seeking simplicity, divide the soul into two facets: understanding and desire. They further bifurcate both categories, positing a contemplative understanding that remains detached from action and solely embraces contemplation. This they term "intelligence," as Cicero states. Practical understanding, in contrast, comprehends good and evil, guiding the will to embrace or shun these concepts, encompassing knowledge of righteous living. Their division of desire entails "concupiscence" and "will," using the term "will" to denote submission to reason and "concupiscence" to represent unrestrained flight from moderation. However, given our assertion that human reason is deficient, we diverge significantly from their standpoint.

Hence, we shall introduce a distinct perspective, emphasizing two segments within our soul: understanding and will. Understanding deliberates among proposed options, judging what is virtuous and condemnable. Will, in contrast, elects and follows the judgments of the understanding, either pursuing the good or rejecting and shunning the condemned. Though we shall not dwell on Aristotle's nuanced argument regarding understanding's lack of inherent impetus, we can agree that understanding serves as a governor and captain of the soul. Will, in turn, aligns itself with understanding's preferences and desires nothing until understanding passes judgment. This alignment underscores Aristotle's assertion that "fleeing or desiring is the equivalent for the desire, as denying or approving is for the understanding." The guidance of understanding in directing the will correctly will be further explored. Our present aim is to demonstrate that the entire spectrum of human soul faculties can be distilled into these two components. Consequently, the senses also fall under the jurisdiction of understanding. Philosophers segregate senses into two factions: those inclined towards sensuality and others towards virtue and honor. Furthermore, we shall employ the more widely used term "will" in place of "desire."

Now let us contemplate the faculties within each facet. Philosophers unanimously posit that reason dwells within the soul, serving as a guiding light for understanding and a governing force for the will. They envision reason as a divine light that discerns between good and evil, equipped with the capacity to govern admirably. In contrast, the senses are enveloped in ignorance, incapable of contemplating profound matters, invariably bound to earthly concerns. As for desire, they believe that if it submits to reason instead of yielding to the senses, it is impelled towards the pursuit of the good and the honorable. By adhering to reason, desire can tread

the righteous path. Conversely, if it succumbs to the senses, it becomes debased and corrupted, indulging in shameless conduct without restraint. Philosophers maintain that human understanding harbors an intrinsic reason to guide virtuous living, contingent upon its preservation and the nurturing of innate virtue. They posit an inferior impetus—labeled as the senses—which, if not reined in, leads reason astray. They assert that reason has the power to gradually tame the senses until they diminish into insignificance. As for the will, philosophers place it as a mediator between reason and the senses—free to align with reason or surrender to the senses.

Experience compels them to admit that establishing reason's dominion within oneself is a formidable challenge. The initial impetus often emerges from sensuality, followed by deception through superficial notions of good. Uncontrolled desires then destabilize individuals, akin to Plato's depiction of "cords" pulling them in various directions. Cicero aptly remarks that nature ignites faint sparks of goodness in our spirits, easily tarnished by false beliefs and immoral behavior. Moreover, philosophers concede that once such ailments grip the soul, they wield immense power, difficult to restrain. They liken these conditions to runaway horses. "As a runaway horse," they describe, "kicks without restraint after escaping its master, so does the soul, casting off reason and surrendering to concupiscence, spiral into chaos." Philosophers maintain that virtues and vices alike are within our control. If the ability to do good or evil were not in our hands, refraining from such actions would also be beyond our power. Thus, if we possess the freedom to refrain, we also possess the freedom to act. Consequently, we exercise choice in all our deeds, both positive and negative. Some philosophers have even gone to the extreme of asserting that life itself originates from God, while the capacity to live virtuously stems from our own selves. In sum, philosophers assert that the reason within human

understanding is sufficient to guide us and illuminate virtuous courses of action. The will, under reason's influence, faces temptation from the senses to transgress, yet its freedom prevents it from yielding entirely to reason.

The Christian Perspective on the Will

Turning to Christian church scholars, while acknowledging that sin weakens reason and the will is beset by diverse concupiscences, many have aligned themselves more closely with philosophers than perhaps necessary. Two reasons seem to influence early church fathers in this regard. Firstly, fearing ridicule from philosophers and the risk of undermining their teachings, they sought to retain a semblance of compatibility. Secondly, the flesh's inclination towards complacency might have led to disregard for good works. Thus, they endeavored to bridge the gap between scripture and philosophical thought to avoid causing offense.

However, their emphasis appears to be on the latter reason. St. Chrysostom, for instance, asserts, "God has given us free choice to decide between good and evil, without imposing constraint. He awaits our willing approach, rather than coercing us." He reiterates, "The wicked can become virtuous if they choose, and the virtuous can decline into wickedness. God grants us free choice in our nature, refraining from imposition while providing remedies that we can utilize." Likewise, he upholds that just as we require God's grace for any good deed, we must also contribute from our side. St. Jerome's perspective aligns with Chrysostom's, asserting, "We must initiate, and God shall complete; we offer our efforts, and God supplements our deficiencies." While these statements appear to endow humans

with greater power than warranted, this approach seems intended to awaken human diligence. Whether they were justified in this stance will soon become clear. Notably, Greek fathers, especially St. Chrysostom, might have exceeded the proper bounds in exalting human capability. Nonetheless, nearly all early church fathers, except St. Augustine, exhibit inconsistency or express hesitation and obscurity on this matter. Their writings lack a definitive consensus, and thus, we will avoid considering each individual's viewpoint. Instead, we shall touch upon these perspectives sporadically, in accordance with our discussion's progression.

Subsequent authors, emerging after the church fathers, endeavored to establish intricate defenses for human capabilities. Unfortunately, their progression led to a gradual deterioration, culminating in the widespread belief that only sensuality was marred in people, while reason remained largely unscathed and freely wielded its intentions. The term "free will" perpetually echoed among the Latins, and the Greeks employed an even more audacious expression signifying personal power.

Given that the notion of "free will" has profoundly permeated the populace, even reaching the uninformed masses, the majority of those who sought intellectual prestige acknowledge a certain ignorance regarding the extent of this freedom. Let us, therefore, begin by comprehending the essence of the term, and subsequently draw from the unadulterated teachings of scripture to discern humanity's potential to commit good or evil.

Despite the widespread use of the term "free will" across the world, few have taken the time to elucidate its meaning. It appears that in his time, Origen provided a definition that garnered widespread acceptance: "the faculty of reason to distinguish between good and

evil, coupled with the will's ability to choose either." St. Augustine concurs with this definition, describing it as "the ability of reason and will to choose good in the presence of God's grace, and evil in its absence." St. Bernard, in his quest for precision, resorts to a more obscure description, naming it "consent" due to the freedom of will and the discernment of reason, qualities both immutable. Anselm's definition offers little clarity, defining it as the "power to uphold righteousness for its own sake." The "Sentences" master and scholastic theologians gravitate towards Augustine's definition, finding it more accessible and inclusive of the essential role played by God's grace. However, they add nuances in the hope of improving or at least elucidating existing definitions. Initially, they ascribe the term "will" to reason, which distinguishes between good and evil. Adding the descriptor "free" to "will," they emphasize its aptitude to incline towards either. Given that freedom naturally accompanies the will, St. Thomas Aquinas suggests a suitable definition: "free will is the power to choose, residing between understanding and will, yet leaning more towards the latter."

Our understanding of free choice's potency lies in reason and will. Yet, it remains imperative to ascertain the scope of its influence. Commonly, matters external to the kingdom of God are attributed to human discernment and choice, while true righteousness derives from divine grace and the transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit. This understanding finds resonance in the book "The Calling of the Gentiles," which posits three categories of willingness: sensory, animal, and spiritual. The first two are considered free, while the third is the result of the Holy Spirit's workings. The validity of this notion warrants closer examination, and for now, we shall focus on providing an overview of others' opinions. This perspective elucidates why discussions of free will often pivot towards spiritual obedience rather than dwelling on external physical actions. While

the primary inquiry is centered on spiritual obedience, it is unwise to ignore the broader context. We shall undoubtedly establish the significance of this in due course.

Moreover, theologians have advanced a threefold division of freedom within theological schools. These categories entail freedom from necessity, freedom from sin, and freedom from suffering. According to this framework, the first form of freedom is so inherently ingrained in human nature that it cannot be relinquished. They concede that the latter two forms of freedom are forfeited through sin. This distinction is amenable, yet it must not be conflated with the confusion between "necessity" and "constraint," a topic that will be clarified at an appropriate juncture. The consensus supports the notion that human ability to perform good hinges on God's grace, particularly the special grace of regeneration bestowed exclusively upon the elect. However, it remains unclear whether human ability to perform good is utterly eradicated or whether a residue, feeble and minute, persists—incapable of any action without divine grace, yet functional in tandem with it. Attempting to resolve this ambiguity, the "Sentences" master proposes the need for a twofold grace to equip individuals for virtuous conduct. He labels one "working," fueling an effective desire for good; the other he terms "cooperating," supporting the will's virtuous inclination. However, I am wary of this division, as it implies that the grace of God instills an effective desire for the good. This suggests that, by one's inherent nature, a partial inclination towards the good exists, though non-efficacious. St. Bernard seems to align with this notion, asserting that "every good will is the work of God, yet a person, prompted by personal impetus, may still desire a good will." The "Sentences" master appears to misconstrue St. Augustine's stance while attempting to parallel his viewpoint.

Furthermore, a query concerning the second aspect troubles me due to the erroneous perceptions it has engendered. The scholastics contend that the reason for cooperating with God's grace is to either reject the initial grace offered—rendering it futile—or to confirm it through obedience. This viewpoint is echoed even by the author of "The Calling of the Gentiles," who maintains that those endowed with rational judgment can either distance themselves from grace or embrace it. Thus, it is deemed virtuous when they do not shun it, granting them merit for committing to an action that could have been avoided if they chose, although they could not have accomplished it without the cooperation of God's grace.

I have elucidated these points in passing to underscore my divergence from scholastic theologians. Their teachings possess more integrity than those of subsequent sophists, yet we still diverge on various matters, given their departure from their predecessors' purity. However, through this distinction, we can better understand their rationale for attributing free choice to humanity. Ultimately, the "Sentences" master underscores that "a person is deemed to possess free will not because they can perform good as readily as evil, but because they are unbound by constraint. This freedom remains unaltered even if we are wicked and ensnared by sin, only capable of choosing evil." We thus witness their admission that free will does not stem from an individual's equal capability to choose good and evil, but from the act of choosing driven by their will, devoid of compulsion. While this sentiment holds true, it is worth pondering the audacity of attaching such a lofty title to something of relatively modest stature.

Oh, the allure of such a freedom! To claim that a person is not coerced into servitude by sin, but rather, is bound voluntarily by sin's chains! Truly, I find these semantic debates that agitate the Church

quite distasteful. Yet, it is my belief that we should steer clear of any language containing traces of absurdity, particularly if it carries the risk of misconceptions. When people are attributed with the label of "free will," how many fail to immediately assume that an individual commands both their judgment and will, capable of turning in either direction through sheer personal prowess? However, the potential danger could be averted if individuals are educated about the true meaning of "free will." Alas, I must express that given our proclivity to gravitate towards falsehood and deceit, we may seize upon a single word as an opportunity for sin rather than be enlightened by lengthy explanations. The peril entailed by this language is evident through our collective experience. After its introduction, the term was embraced in a manner that diverted attention from the early fathers' teachings, allowing people to embrace it as a source of pride.

Augustine on Free Will

Moreover, if we are swayed by the authority of the fathers—given their repeated use of the term "will"—their actual sentiments about it become evident through its application. St. Augustine, in particular, does not hesitate to characterize the will as "bound." Although he does, in certain instances, argue against those who negate the existence of free choice, he is clear about his stance when he remarks: "Let no one dare to deny free will in a way that excuses sin." Yet, he concedes that "the human will is not free without the aid of God's Spirit, as it succumbs to wicked desires." He also acknowledges that "after the will was conquered by the vice into which it fell, our nature lost its freedom." He reiterates that "free choice is captive and powerless to perform good." In light of this, is it not possible that he

intends to provoke thought when he seems to jest about free choice, implying that it does exist in people, but not to absolve guilt? Is this not a pointed critique of the term itself, mocking its connotation of freedom? Therefore, while I might not quarrel significantly with someone employing this term in a sane context, I must emphasize that the use of this term is fraught with danger. Rather, it would greatly benefit the Church if we refrained from employing it. If someone seeks my advice, I would counsel them to abstain from its usage.

It might seem that I've set myself against a tide by acknowledging the ambivalence among all the ecclesiastical doctors, barring St. Augustine, when addressing this matter. Some may construe this admission as an effort to dismiss opposing views. However, my intention is straightforward—to offer readers an honest appraisal, guiding them to understand the actualities. My aim is to prevent them from ascribing undue significance to these doctors' teachings. Alas, readers would remain ensnared in uncertainty, as these fathers often vacillate. They occasionally strip human capabilities, urging reliance solely on God's grace, while at other times they attribute certain capacities to individuals, or at least give the appearance of doing so.

Nevertheless, it is not arduous to reveal through their utterances that, notwithstanding the ambiguity in their words, they do not hold human capabilities in high esteem, or, at the very least, hold them in meager regard, attributing the glory of good works entirely to the Holy Spirit. What else does St. Cyprian's oft-cited assertion, frequently referenced by St. Augustine, signify? "We must not boast about anything, for there is nothing good that is truly ours." This sentiment humbles a person entirely, compelling them to seek everything from God. Eucherius, the former bishop of Lyons, echoes

a similar sentiment: "Christ is the tree of life, and whoever reaches out their hand to partake shall live. The tree of knowledge of good and evil is free choice, and whoever consumes its fruit shall perish." St. Chrysostom similarly proclaims that human nature is not merely tainted by sin but is wholly steeped in it. If nothing good resides within us and we are entirely consumed by sin, with no room to assess the value of free choice, how then can one apportion the credit for virtuous deeds between God and themselves? Although I could present numerous parallel citations from other fathers, to avoid any insinuation of bias, I refrain from a more exhaustive list. However, I confidently assert that even though the fathers occasionally veer towards excessive praise of free choice, their ultimate intent is to divert individuals from placing undue faith in their own abilities, compelling them to recognize that their true strength lies solely in God. Now, let us straightforwardly explore the essence of human nature.

Understanding Human Nature

I am compelled to reiterate the theme introduced at the outset of this chapter: one attains true self-awareness when they are humbled and shaken by the realization of their own wretchedness, destitution, vulnerability, and dishonor. A person will not diminish themselves excessively if they acknowledge the necessity of seeking from God what they lack within. Contrarily, they must refrain from attributing any modicum of goodness beyond what is appropriate, lest they succumb to vain confidence, committing the sacrilege of usurping God's glory. Indeed, whenever the passion to claim something inherently ours arises, that is, something within us surpassing God,

we must recognize this impulse as the counsel of the very entity that led our first ancestors astray—to desire to be like God, possessing knowledge of good and evil. When a word exalts a person within themselves, it is imperative that we shun it, unless we are willing to take counsel from our adversary.

How gratifying it is to contemplate that we possess such intrinsic power, allowing us to find contentment within ourselves. Yet, the scriptural admonitions are far too numerous to be disregarded, serving as guiding lights to prevent us from falling into vain assurance. Consider such verses as: “Cursed is the one who trusts in human strength and relies on the flesh” (Jeremiah 17:5). Also, “The Lord does not delight in the strength of the horse, nor is He pleased by the legs of a strong man; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, who hope in His mercy” (Psalm 147:10–11). Furthermore, “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (Isaiah 40:29). And again, “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31). All these passages converge on the essential point that no confidence should ever be placed in our own strength if we desire God's aid—He who resists the proud and grants grace to the humble. Moreover, let us not forget the promises laid out for us: “I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants” (Isaiah 44:3). And, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you without money, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost” (Isaiah 55:1); along with similar assurances, testifying that God's blessings are reserved exclusively for those who stand humbled and destitute, acutely aware of their spiritual impoverishment. Equally significant are other assurances like the one in Isaiah: “The sun will no more be

your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory” (Isaiah 60:19).

Undoubtedly, the Lord does not seek to strip His servants of the light of the sun and the moon. However, His intention is to manifest His own glory in His servants, leading them to eschew undue reliance on worldly grandeur. This saying of St. Chrysostom has long resonated with me, asserting that “the cornerstone of our wisdom is humility.” An even more profound declaration is found in the words of St. Augustine: “Just as Demosthenes, the Greek orator, when questioned about the first principle of eloquence, repeatedly responded 'pronunciation,' similarly, when asked about the fundamental principles of the Christian faith, I respond 'humility,' and this answer remains constant throughout.” St. Augustine's notion of "humility" doesn't entail merely restraining oneself from pride when possessing power. Rather, it signifies acknowledging one's inherent humility, recognizing that our sole refuge lies in humbling ourselves before God. As he eloquently states elsewhere: “Let no one deceive themselves. By our nature, we are all devilish. Whatever good we possess, it comes from God. For what can we claim as our own except sin? If we desire to claim something as our own, let us take possession of sin, for righteousness emanates from God.” And also: “How dare we place such unwarranted faith in our own strength? It is wounded, defeated, shattered, and ruined. It necessitates sincere confession, not false defense.”

Therefore, let us refrain from disputing with God over our supposed rights, acting as if we have been unjustly stripped of our own. Just as our humility leads to God's exaltation, so does our acknowledgment of our lowliness constantly attract His mercy as a remedy. While I do not propose that individuals should renounce their rightful claims to

God and distort their perceptions to negate their potential—if any—in order to artificially cultivate humility, I simply advocate relinquishing any infatuation with self and the allure of prominence. Such desires often blind individuals to their true nature, causing them to view themselves through the lens of Scripture.

Man's Power and Limitations

To guide our discussion along the path we charted, where we distinguished the human soul into understanding and will, we must first consider the strengths of the understanding. To assert that it is so utterly blinded that it retains no vestige of knowledge concerning the world contradicts not only the teachings of God's Word but also common human experience. We observe the human spirit yearning to seek truth, a disposition that would not manifest itself without prior exposure to glimpses of truth. Thus, a faint glimmer of enlightenment resides within the human spirit, evidenced by its inherent affinity for truth. The contrast emerges when considering animals devoid of reason, which dismiss this pursuit, emphasizing their inherent spiritual obtuseness. However, this desire for truth, in its nascent form before active engagement, succumbs to futility due to ignorance. The human understanding, in its quest for truth, becomes wayward, akin to a blind individual stumbling through darkness, colliding with various elements until they are entirely lost. Similarly, in the pursuit of truth, the human understanding reveals its ineptitude and inability to navigate effectively. Often, it fails to discern what merits investigation, directing its curiosity towards frivolous pursuits of no real consequence. In contrast, essential matters are either scorned or cursorily brushed aside, yielding no

significant progress. Seldom does it genuinely dedicate its effort to these crucial matters. Despite the laments of numerous pagan scholars regarding this corruption, they themselves remain ensnared within it. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes, meticulously enumerates various pursuits that people find pleasurable and believe to be wise, only to ultimately declare them "vanity and striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 12:8).

Nonetheless, when the human understanding engages in certain studies, its endeavors are not entirely in vain, especially when directed towards worldly matters. Its sensitivity is evidenced by the fact that it occasionally grasps fragments of higher truths, even if its pursuit is somewhat haphazard. However, the ability of the human understanding to fathom higher truths pales in comparison to its comprehension of more mundane matters. When it endeavors to transcend earthly concerns, it invariably acknowledges its limitations. Nevertheless, in order to grasp the extent of its capabilities in both realms, a nuanced differentiation is necessary.

Earthly and Heavenly Things

This distinction pertains to the comprehension of terrestrial and celestial matters. I designate as "terrestrial" those subjects unrelated to God and His kingdom, as well as to the authentic righteousness and immortality of the hereafter. These topics pertain solely to present life, confined within its boundaries. On the other hand, "celestial matters" encompass the principles of genuine righteousness and the enigmatic realities of the heavenly realm. The former category encompasses political doctrines, efficient household management, technical crafts, philosophy, and all that falls under the

umbrella of "liberal arts." Meanwhile, the knowledge of God, His divine will, and the principles that govern righteous living constitutes the latter, celestial category.

As we consider the realm of worldly matters, particularly the political domain, it becomes evident that due to their inherent social nature, individuals possess an innate inclination to foster and uphold society. Thus, universal notions of honor and civil order are imprinted within the collective consciousness of humanity. This integral understanding is the very source of the recognition that human communities, as well as individuals, necessitate the establishment of laws. This understanding is firmly rooted in human cognition. This convergence leads to the consensus that both groups and individuals must abide by laws, since within each resides an inherent blueprint for order, originating from nature itself. This is precisely why societies and individuals alike have perpetually embraced the necessity of laws—a phenomenon emerging from an innate seed planted by nature, unaffected by external influences or a need for a guiding figure. It's true that conflicts and divisions arise swiftly when certain individuals yearn for the annulment of all laws, the inversion of societal norms, and the abolition of righteousness itself. In their pursuit, they aim to govern themselves according to personal impulses, akin to outlaws and marauders. Conversely, others—commonly encountered—contest not the concept in its entirety, maintaining a foundational conception of justice, from which their opposition stems. Those who contend do not reject the very idea; their differences lie in the assessment of which laws are superior. This divergence underscores the vulnerability of human understanding, which, although convinced of its correct course, often stumbles and falters. Nonetheless, it remains a fundamental truth that the essence of political order is ingrained within all individuals. This serves as undeniable evidence that the light of reason is

universally inherent when it comes to the governance of present existence.

Human Skills in the Liberal Arts

Turning our focus to the realm of manual and liberal arts, the proficiency demonstrated in acquiring such skills attests to the potency of human understanding in this sphere. Though not everyone may be adept in mastering all these arts, the fact that no art exists that someone cannot learn at least in part is proof enough of the innate human aptitude. Furthermore, the acquisition and refinement of these arts extend beyond mere proficiency in learning. Frequently, practitioners introduce novel concepts or enhance existing ones through their creative pursuits. While Plato's contention that this perception is merely a recollection of knowledge the soul possessed before being confined to the corporeal vessel may not hold, reason still obliges us to acknowledge the presence of these foundations within human cognition. These examples underscore the universal concepts of reason naturally embedded within every individual. Despite its universality, this concept is so personalized that each person must recognize it as a divine grace bestowed by God. By illustrating this through the mirror of afflicted individuals and those who have been driven to madness, God aptly portrays the excellence that the human soul would enjoy if not for His illuminating light. This light, inherent within all, stands as a testament to God's generous benevolence bestowed upon every individual.

While it is true that only a select few possess the ability to invent arts, determine their methods of instruction, establish an order for

teaching, attain a thorough understanding of their intricacies, and attain proficiency, these factors do not definitively showcase human ingenuity by nature. Nonetheless, since these attributes are not exclusive to the virtuous, they can indeed be counted among natural gifts. As a result, when we encounter the profound truths illuminated in the works of pagan writers, it should inform our perception that, though humanity's nature is tainted and its integrity compromised, God's numerous blessings still adorn it. Recognizing God's Spirit as the ultimate source of truth prevents us from disregarding truth wherever it may manifest. To spurn the Spirit's gifts is to scorn and demean Him. Therefore, when we peruse the writings of ancient legal scholars and witness their sagacious understanding in establishing equitable social structures, can we doubt their wisdom? Do we dare claim that philosophers erred in meticulously dissecting the secrets of nature and articulating them with eloquence? Should we assert that those who taught us the art of reasoned debate lacked understanding? Is it plausible to consider the inventors of medicine as mere fools? As for other disciplines—can we dismiss them as folly? On the contrary, we cannot engage with books on these subjects without awe, as we are compelled to acknowledge the wisdom they contain.

Natural Endowments are Gifts of God

Hence, it is imperative to attribute any excellence or merit to the grace of God. To do otherwise would be an act of profound ingratitude—a sentiment not shared by pagan poets who openly acknowledge philosophy, law, medicine, and other forms of knowledge as gifts from God. Considering that these individuals,

bereft of any divine assistance beyond nature, exhibited such ingenious insight into worldly matters, these examples should remind us of the extent to which our Lord has blessed human nature, even after it was stripped of its primeval purity. It is vital, however, to recognize that all such gifts are bestowed by God's Spirit, distributed according to His divine will for the collective welfare of humankind. If it was necessary for the Spirit of God to grant specialized knowledge and skill to those who constructed the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 31:1–6, 35:30–35), it is entirely reasonable to affirm that the knowledge pertaining to the most fundamental aspects of human life is also transmitted to us through the agency of God's Spirit.

In the face of skepticism that questions the relevance of God's Spirit for the wicked, those alienated from Him, it is essential to clarify the matter. The argument, though well-intentioned, remains incomplete. When it is affirmed that the Spirit resides solely within the faithful, it is pertinent to remember that this pertains to the Spirit of sanctification—He through whom we are consecrated to God as His sacred abode. Nevertheless, the ceaseless influence, motion, and vitality of God's Spirit pervades all creatures, embracing each according to its nature, as it was endowed during the act of creation. In the scenario where the wicked and unbelieving inadvertently facilitate the comprehension of physics, dialectics, and other disciplines, it is incumbent upon us to utilize such resources. To disregard the gracious offerings of God would be an act of negligence, inviting retribution for our lack of appreciation. Yet let it be known that this power to comprehend, coupled with the understanding it begets, is rendered inconsequential before God when devoid of a foundation in truth. The words of St. Augustine hold true in this regard—an assertion acknowledged even by the master of the Sentences himself: "Just as the graces bestowed upon

humanity beyond its nature were withdrawn post-fall, so were the natural graces, though untainted in origin, tainted in nature." This corruption, not in their origin but in their recipients, is a consequence of human contamination, rendering these graces impure and undeserving of praise.

Heavenly Truth Incomprehensible to Human Reason

Now, let us unravel the facets of human reason in its pursuit of the kingdom of God, as well as its capacity to apprehend spiritual wisdom encompassing three main aspects: knowledge of God, understanding His will, and aligning our lives in accordance with His divine plan.

Addressing the first two aspects, particularly the latter, it becomes evident that those most adept in intellect can be blinder than the very blind they aim to enlighten. This is not to deny the presence of well-formulated discourses about God in the works of philosophers. However, a glaring inconsistency plagues these treatises, revealing a disarray of thoughts and imaginations void of certainty. It is undeniable that God extended them a modicum of insight into His divinity, sparing them the excuse of ignorance for their impiety. Occasionally, He impelled them to articulate statements that could be employed against them. Yet their comprehension remained skewed and unable to steer them toward the truth, missing the mark of genuine understanding. An apt analogy is that of a person in a field during nighttime thunderstorms. Illuminated by lightning, they briefly discern their surroundings, but the transient brilliance fails to

guide their way due to the impending darkness. The fleeting luminosity leaves them stumbling and lost before they can gauge their path, ultimately thwarted by the encroaching obscurity. Moreover, the infrequency of truths amid the pages of philosophers' works is overshadowed by a multitude of erroneous beliefs.

Without God's Illumination Man is Spiritually Blind

Addressing the second aspect, the deficiency in understanding is most conspicuous, as they have never glimpsed a semblance of certainty concerning God's will. This ignorance plunges the human intellect into disarray, inducing a maddening confusion. Consequently, human reason is ill-equipped to approach the truth of comprehending the identity of the one true God and His intentions toward us. However, it is the insidious nature of human presumption that, intoxicated by wicked arrogance, casts doubt on the assertion that reason is incapable of comprehending divine matters. A more reliable means of proving this claim lies in the testimonies of Scripture rather than intricate reasoning. St. John adeptly exemplifies this approach when he emphasizes that "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:4–5). Through these words, he underscores that while human souls are mildly illuminated by the light of God, they remain devoid of understanding concerning God's essence. Why is this the case? For the knowledge of God, their spiritual faculties are steeped in darkness. Consequently, they remain perpetually shrouded in obscurity. This fact is echoed in the designation of "darkness" for

humanity by the Holy Spirit. This term serves to strip them of every shred of spiritual understanding.

Thus, it is apt when St. John avers that the faithful who receive Christ are "born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). This underscores that the flesh is ill-equipped to fathom the profound wisdom of God and His divine attributes, except through the illumination provided by the Holy Spirit. This notion is further reinforced by Christ's acknowledgment to St. Peter that his understanding of Him emerged from a spiritual revelation from God the Father (Matthew 16:17). Adhering to the premise that all the gifts imparted by the Spirit of regeneration to the chosen are absent in our nature, the stability of this argument is beyond reproach. Accordingly, the faithful declare, "For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9). St. Paul corroborates this, asserting, "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). Similarly, John the Baptist, observing the ignorance of his disciples, declares that "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven" (John 3:27). Here, the term "given" implies a spiritual revelation rather than a conventional understanding of nature—a fact underscored by his lamentation that his extensive preaching about Christ had failed to impart divine understanding to his disciples. Thus, the term "given" pertains to a spiritual revelation and not a common grasp of nature. Moses, accusing the people of forgetfulness, simultaneously notes their incapacity to understand the mysteries of God without the bestowal of grace. He declares, "Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear" (Deuteronomy 29:2–4). Moses' assertion can be likened to referring to them as dim-witted when considering the works of God.

In His wisdom, the Lord extends a promise through His prophet to the Israelites, vouchsafing that He shall bestow understanding upon them—knowledge by which they shall come to know Him (Jeremiah 24:7). This assurance resounds with the truth that the human intellect cannot attain spiritual wisdom without the illumination of God Himself. The words of St. Paul echo with even greater clarity, as he contends that "the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Who is this "natural man"? It signifies one who relies solely on the light of natural reasoning. Thus, it becomes evident that spiritual matters elude natural comprehension. Why is this the case? It is not solely due to neglect, but because even the most diligent effort proves incapable of yielding such knowledge. St. Paul clarifies that such understanding necessitates a spiritual discernment. This underscores that these truths, concealed from human intellect, require the revelation of the Spirit to bring them to light. According to this principle, all wisdom of God remains bewildering madness to humanity until illuminated by divine grace. St. Paul himself transcended the boundaries of sight, hearing, and human understanding, gaining insights into the mysteries God prepared for His servants. He attested that human wisdom acts as a veil, hindering a clear contemplation of God (2 Corinthians 3:13–18; 4:3; 12:1–4). This admonishment suffices. The apostle proclaims that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness" and as God ordained it, let it remain so. Can we then bestow upon this earthly wisdom the profound discernment to penetrate divine mysteries and unearth the secrets of His kingdom? Such a delusion must be cast aside.

Natural Law Makes Sin Inexcusable

Now, let us direct our focus towards the third facet—the knowledge of righteous conduct, of true virtue. The human intellect appears to exhibit greater acumen in this realm than in the aforementioned matters. The apostle affirms that even those without the law possess within themselves an innate moral law, inscribed on their hearts. Their consciences serve as witnesses to their actions, either accusing or defending them before the tribunal of God's judgment (Romans 2:14–15). Thus, even the Gentiles, whose souls bear the imprint of God's righteousness, are not entirely bereft of the means to discern proper conduct. Conventional wisdom asserts that natural law, as described by the apostle, equips individuals with sufficient guidance for virtuous living. Yet, a thorough contemplation of the purpose behind this law of nature elucidates its limitations in leading us to the pinnacle of reason and truth. A careful reading of St. Paul's words will shed light on this aspect. He declares earlier that "as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law, and as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law" (Romans 2:12). To address the seeming disparity of ignorant individuals meeting instant perdition, he adds that "their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them" (Romans 2:15). The ultimate objective of the natural law is to render individuals inexcusable. Hence, we may aptly define it as a moral conscience that differentiates between right and wrong, sufficiently preventing ignorance from serving as a pretext. Conscience convicts individuals through its internal testimony, stripping them of excuses. Human inclination often skews towards self-flattery, fostering an eagerness to avert the acknowledgment of one's transgressions. Plato contended that ignorance alone incites

sin—an assertion that would hold merit if human hypocrisy could prevent divine judgment from pursuing a guilty conscience.

However, since the sinner, in falling from the capacity to distinguish between good and evil embedded within, cannot avert moments of clarity, he is repeatedly compelled to confront the truth. It is therefore misguided to claim that sin arises solely from ignorance. This notion aligns with Themistius, another philosopher, who posits that human intellect rarely deceives itself in general reflections, reserving deception for specific considerations pertaining to the self. Instances abound: when queried about the morality of murder in the abstract, none would deny its wickedness. However, an individual contemplating the demise of their foe may perceive it as virtuous. Similarly, an adulterer may censure promiscuity generally while rationalizing their own actions. This ignorance arises when, after formulating a sound universal judgment, the individual becomes entangled in the matter at hand, forgetting the precedent established when it was considered independently. St. Augustine expounds upon this matter adeptly in his commentary on Psalm 57:1. Nevertheless, Themistius' perspective is not universally applicable. There are instances when the gravity of the crime closely impinges on the sinner's conscience, driving them not by self-deception under the illusion of goodness, but with full awareness and volition toward evil. Such sentiments yield statements found in pagan writings, such as "I know what is better and commendable, yet I persist in pursuing what is worse." To dispel any ambiguity on this topic, Aristotle presents a clear distinction between "incontinence" and "intemperance." He elucidates, "Incontinence robs an individual of specific discernment between good and evil due to disordered desires, leading them to justify their own sin despite condemning it universally. When clarity eventually emerges, penitence compels them to acknowledge their wrongdoing. Intemperance, a more perilous ailment, arises when an

individual knowingly commits wrong, persistently pursuing their wicked inclinations."

Upon recognizing the universal capacity of individuals to discern between good and evil, we must not hastily assume its complete health and wholeness. While their understanding is endowed with the capability to distinguish good from evil—sufficient to preclude the plea of ignorance—it need not encompass every detail. Rather, it is necessary that they possess enough knowledge to resist equivocation, for their conscience shall convict them. However, exploring the understanding of righteousness as defined by God's perfect law exposes its inherent blindness. It fails to comprehend the primary tenets of the commandments within the first table—such as placing trust in God, extolling His might and righteousness, invoking His name, and observing His Sabbath. Has any human intellect ever—not to mention comprehended—conceived that the genuine worship and service of God encompass these elements? Even when the wicked strive to honor God, they perpetually revert to their misguided notions, persistently rejecting the spiritual worship that alone pleases Him. Should we laud an understanding incapable of receiving righteous admonitions? Our understanding, in this respect, mirrors such deficiency; its insensitivity is undeniable.

Turning to the directives of the second table—the realm of human and civic life—we find a marginally heightened understanding, given their proximity to daily existence. Nevertheless, human comprehension occasionally falters, even in these areas. Even among loftier minds, embracing excellence deemed too demanding remains a challenge, tempting them to contrive rationalizations against its pursuit. The human intellect can only assess this challenge as a heart weighed down by bearing such exacting virtue—refuting it seems virtuous and valiant. Contrarily, God commands His followers to

uphold the patience condemned by the world. Alas, our understanding is marred in this regard, incapable of identifying its own wicked inclinations. The carnal individual remains oblivious to their inner malaise, and their innate light flickers out before the path of escape is discerned. The philosophers often consider only the outward manifestations of heart's desires as unrestrained, dismissing the more covert, insidious cravings.

Thus, just as we reproached Plato for attributing all sin to ignorance, we must similarly reject the notion that deliberate wickedness underlies all transgressions. Our experiences reveal that we often sin with honorable intentions. The web of ignorance, error, impediments, and perplexity that ensnares our reasoning and understanding renders them ill-equipped for providing certainty in life. St. Paul aptly exposes the limitations of these faculties, stating that "of ourselves, we are not sufficient to think of anything as being from ourselves" (2 Corinthians 3:5). This encompasses not only volition and emotion but extends to the very realm of thought, determining what is morally commendable.

One might question, "Is our activity, wisdom, knowledge, and earnest endeavors so profoundly corrupted that we cannot even contemplate or reflect on what is good in the eyes of God?" Though this proposition seems daunting, it aligns with the Holy Spirit's perspective, for He perceives human thoughts as mere vanity. He asserts that "every intent of the thoughts of [man's] heart is only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5; 8:21). If all human musings, aspirations, deliberations, and contrivances inherently bear wickedness, how can we fathom devising actions pleasing to God, who esteems nothing but righteousness and holiness? Thus, irrespective of its direction, human reasoning is ensnared in futility. David, recognizing this deficiency within himself, implores God to grant him understanding

to rightly grasp His precepts (Psalm 119:34). His plea implies that his own understanding falls short. St. Augustine's discernment into the shortcomings of human reasoning regarding divine matters leads him to confess that the illumination of the Holy Spirit is as indispensable to understanding as the sun's radiance is to sight. He further emphasizes that the eyes of our understanding remain shut until our Lord opens them.

Natural Inclination Lacks Discernment

Moving on to the will—a repository of freedom, if indeed it exists—we shall examine its nature. We've seen that choice is more aligned with the will than the understanding. Pertaining to the matter of freedom, let us not hastily conclude that the philosophers' claim, commonly accepted, is indicative of inherent goodness in the human will. When they assert that all entities naturally incline toward the good, we must discern that the power of free choice should not be conflated with inclinations arising from nature's bent, but rather from deliberate reflection. The scholastic theologians concur, asserting that free choice involves reason's consideration of both options. This signifies that the object of desire must be suitable for choice, and deliberation must precede the act of choosing. Considering the natural human longing for the good, we realize that it is akin to the appetites of brute beasts. These creatures desire whatever serves their well-being, pursuing whatever seems good to their senses. This natural inclination lacks discernment regarding what reason, in accordance with the excellence of our immortal nature, dictates. Consequently, it fails to consider it with true understanding, yielding to instinct akin to the behavior of beasts.

This inclination, when roused, is unrelated to free choice. True free choice mandates a discernment of the good through right reason, knowing what is chosen and selecting it with purpose.

To dispel confusion, we must recognize two potential misinterpretations. In this context, "appetite" does not signify a specific movement of the will but rather a natural inclination. Furthermore, the term "good" does not denote righteousness or virtue but encompasses all creatures' yearning for comfort within the bounds of their nature. This natural desire does not validate the existence of human freedom, just as the tendency of unconscious entities to fulfill their nature does not denote freedom. Let us then proceed to further inquiries. Does the human will stand so deeply tainted that it only produces evil, or is there an aspect of it unblemished, giving rise to virtuous desires?

Paul's Teaching on the Will

Some contend that the ability to effectively will is granted through God's initial grace, implying the existence of a faculty within the soul to aspire toward the good. However, this faculty is deemed feeble, unable to develop a steadfast desire that propels one towards exertion. This notion aligns with the perspective commonly embraced by scholastics, influenced by early church fathers like Origen. When examining human nature in its pristine state, they refer to St. Paul's words in the seventh chapter of Romans: "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do" (Romans 7:15). In this manner, they interpret St. Paul's discourse. Yet, they misconstrue the context, as St. Paul addresses the Christian struggle. He briefly touches upon

it in his letter to the Galatians, highlighting the continuous battle between the Spirit and the flesh experienced by believers (Galatians 5:17). Notably, the faithful possess the Spirit not inherently, but through spiritual rebirth.

St. Paul's discourse pertains to the regenerated, evident when he attributes the absence of good within himself to his flesh, emphasizing that sin resides within him rather than his core being. He emphasizes this point by stating, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find" (Romans 7:18). Clearly, he speaks of those reborn through God's Spirit, who earnestly strive for goodness. The subsequent passage reinforces this perspective, declaring, "For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind" (Romans 7:22–23). Such internal strife is exclusive to those regenerated by God's Spirit, who bear remnants of their flesh. St. Augustine, while initially applying this passage to human nature, later conceded its inaccuracy and incongruity. Should we acknowledge even the minutest inclination towards good without divine grace, how shall we address the apostle who denies our capacity to conceive any good thoughts? How shall we respond to the Lord's declaration, as conveyed through Moses, that "the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21)? Their misunderstanding of one passage has led them astray; thus, we must not rest content with their misconception. Instead, we should heed the words of Christ, who proclaims, "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34). As all humans are sinners by nature, they are consequently enslaved to sin. Thus, if the entirety of humanity is shackled by the chains of sin, it follows that the will—the core of their being—is likewise bound and restricted.

More Scripture Proof of Man's Corruption

Moreover, no portrayal encapsulates an individual better than the titles ascribed to them in Scripture. Examining these titles, we uncover the depth of human frailty. As Scripture avers, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6), unveiling humanity's wretched state. The apostle attests, "For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:6–7). The flesh is so corrupted that it harbors hostility towards God, incapable of embracing divine righteousness. It produces only grounds for death. If human nature solely comprises flesh, how can we expect to draw any goodness from it? Some may argue that these attributes solely pertain to the sensual person, not the higher faculties of the soul. Such a notion is promptly refuted by the words of Christ and the apostle. Christ emphasizes that people, being "flesh," must experience rebirth (John 3:6–7). This rebirth is not confined to one aspect; it signifies complete renewal. The comparison between the Spirit and the flesh, employed by both Christ and the apostle, leaves no middle ground. Therefore, every facet not characterized by spirituality aligns with fleshliness. Regeneration alone grants us a measure of the Spirit.

Thus, all that we inherit from nature is flesh. I shall not exhaustively enumerate David's and the prophets' portrayals of human futility. Yet, the profound declaration in the Psalms endures: "Surely men of low degree are a vapor, men of high degree are a lie; if they are weighed on the scales, they are altogether lighter than vapor" (Psalm

62:9). This resounding indictment unveils the inadequacy of human thought. All notions emerging from it are deemed foolish, vain, misguided, and tainted. Likewise, Jeremiah admonishes that "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). Permit me to focus on a single reference that mirrors the entire portrait of our nature—an unequivocal mirror that reflects the undeniable truth. St. Paul aims not merely to reprimand, urging transformation in behavior. Instead, he seeks to teach that all are ensnared in such wretchedness that deliverance necessitates divine mercy. This can only be established by demonstrating our inherent ruin. St. Paul thus employs these testimonies to unveil human nature's utter depravity. Let us unequivocally acknowledge that St. Paul's depiction is not restricted to societal corruption but signifies intrinsic corruption. Otherwise, his argument would lose its foundation. The purpose is to underscore our dependence on divine mercy, as every individual stands lost and ruined in themselves. I shall refrain from elaborating on how these testimonies align with St. Paul's intent, for I consider these words to be his own rather than mere citations from the prophets.

Initially, the stripping away occurs in the realm of righteousness—integrity and purity are cast aside. Subsequently, understanding falters, as a consequence of which humanity collectively turns away from God. Such a turn is emblematic of the highest form of wisdom—seeking the Divine. The fruits of faithlessness follow suit: decay pervades, rot takes hold, and goodness becomes scarce. A deeper plunge reveals the very vices that those consumed by unrighteousness propagate throughout their being. Lastly, the testimony stands that all mankind lacks the awe of God—a vital compass guiding our path. If these are the endowments inherited by the human race, then to expect inherent goodness within our nature is an empty pursuit. I acknowledge that not every sin is openly

manifested in each individual; however, none can refute that the seeds of such transgressions reside within all. Comparable to a body harboring an impending illness, regardless of its invisibility or absence of pain, it cannot be deemed healthy. Similarly, a soul tainted by such filth cannot be deemed healthy—though, of course, the analogy falls short. While bodily ailments allow the persistence of life, the soul, immersed in the pit of iniquity, not only bears defectiveness but is devoid of goodness.

God's Grace Restrains Evil

A question akin to the preceding inquiry emerges. Throughout history, certain individuals, led by nature, have fostered virtue throughout their lives. Though their morals might be imperfect, their aspirations for nobility underscore some semblance of purity within their nature. The full value of such virtue before God shall be elucidated when discussing the worth of deeds. Yet, for the present, we must address the matter at hand. These instances signify that we must not entirely regard human nature as inherently deficient. Through its guidance, some have not merely committed excellent deeds but have also displayed honor throughout their lives.

It is paramount to acknowledge that within the universal corruption we have delineated, God's grace occupies a space—not to rectify nature's corruption, but to bridle and constrain it. Were God to permit unbridled indulgence in passion, all would bear witness to the manifold vices that St. Paul condemns in human nature. For how could anyone extricate themselves from the human race? Such separation would be essential to exempt oneself from St. Paul's indictment of all humanity—the assertion that their feet rush to shed

blood, their hands partake in extortion and homicide, their bellies resembling open graves, tongues deceitful, and lips venomous. Works rendered futile, wicked, rotten, and deadly; hearts devoid of God; wickedness dwelling within; eyes set to ambush; hearts haughty, prone to insults and harm. In essence, each member poised for evil (Romans 3:9–18). If each soul harbors these monstrous vices, as vehemently expressed by the apostle, the unrestrained pursuit of human passions would result in unparalleled chaos—no ferocious beast can rival human passion's propensity for disorder, nor is there a river more rapid, vehement, or prone to flood. The Lord purifies such maladies in His chosen ones, as we shall elaborate further. In those deemed reprobate, these maladies are merely restrained, akin to a bridle curbing their overflow, ensuring the world's preservation. Consequently, some are constrained by shame, others by the fear of laws, preventing them from yielding to numerous evils, although their wicked desires may remain thinly veiled. Some perceive an honorable life as advantageous, thus embracing it to a certain extent. Others extend their endeavor to showcase exceptional virtue, exercising a majesty that subdues the common populace. Through His providence, the Lord checks the corruption within our nature without fully cleansing it.

God May Favor the Wicked with Particular Gifts

A query may arise, asserting the inadequacy of this resolution. It implies a binary—either Catiline transforms akin to Camillus, or Camillus stands as proof that nature, when channeled suitably, retains some measure of goodness. While the virtues present in

Camillus are undoubtedly God's gifts and merit praise, their significance concerning the inherent goodness of Camillus' nature must be scrutinized. For this, a return to the heart is essential, arguing that if an individual exhibits such heart-driven integrity, then human nature must indeed possess the capacity for fostering good. However, what if the heart is tainted, hostile, and ignorant of the pursuit of righteousness? Even if Camillus were to be considered a natural person, his heart would undoubtedly bear the stain of corruption. What potential for goodness can we attribute to human nature when the pinnacle of integrity showcases an inclination towards corruption? Hence, since a person is not deemed virtuous if cloaked in vices masked as virtues, we cannot ascribe to human will the power to desire the good when entrenched in corruption. Therefore, the simplest and most assured conclusion lies in asserting that such virtues do not emanate from nature but represent distinct graces bestowed by the Lord. He grants them even to the wicked, according to His will and measure. Consequently, it is common in our discourse to refer to individuals as either inherently good or inherently bad, endowed with a good or bad nature, while acknowledging their inclusion within the universal realm of human corruption. This practice reflects the unique grace that God imparts individually, bestowing upon some that which He withholds from others.

Man Sins of Necessity, His Will Being Held Captive

The will, ensnared in the bonds of sin and subjected to slavery, is rendered incapable of inclining towards goodness, much less

aspiring towards it. This movement marks the inception of our return to God—a conversion that Scripture attributes entirely to the grace of the Holy Spirit. Just as Jeremiah implores the Lord to "restore him if He wills restoration" (Jeremiah 31:18), the spiritual liberation of the faithful is depicted in the same chapter. The prophet underscores their deliverance from the grasp of a stronger adversary, symbolizing the sinner's captivity under Satan's yoke during periods of divine abandonment. Yet, the will persists within humanity, an innate yearning inclined towards sin. When plunged into this condition, individuals were not stripped of their will, but of a virtuous one. Hence, the assertion by St. Bernard that the will resides in all people holds true; however, desiring the good signifies an advancement, while pursuing evil becomes our culpability. The act of willing belongs to an individual, desiring evil is characteristic of a corrupted nature, and aspiring to good emanates from grace.

Expressing that the will is bereft of freedom and inevitably drawn towards evil might perplex some, but this mode of expression holds merit. It is not illogical; indeed, early church theologians employed this perspective. Some are perturbed due to an inability to discern between necessity and constraint. Yet, if asked whether God's inherent goodness is necessary or constrained, or whether the devil's inherent wickedness is necessary or constrained, what would they answer? Without doubt, God's goodness is so intertwined with His divinity that being good is as inherent to Him as being God. Following his fall, the devil's estrangement from all good is so profound that he can only perpetrate evil. If any should blaspheme, contending that God's goodness merits lesser praise since He is compelled to sustain it, the response is straightforward. His intrinsic goodness prevents Him from engaging in evil, a trait emanating from His boundless goodness, not coercion. The necessity of doing good does not encumber God's free will; similarly, the devil, though

unable to act otherwise, remains engaged in voluntary sin. Thus, to argue that sin is not voluntary in humans due to the necessity of sinning is untenable. St. Augustine consistently expounded this necessity, unswayed even when Celestius attempted to vilify this doctrine. In this context, Augustine affirmed, "By human free will, people fell into sin; yet the corruption ensuing from this fall into sin transformed freedom into necessity." A distinction must be observed: corrupted by the fall, individuals sin voluntarily, not against their own hearts, nor under compulsion. They sin with a predisposition, not external coercion; their nature is so corroded that they are inclined, propelled, and led solely towards evil. Hence, it is evident that they are bound to sin by necessity.

God's Remedy: New Hearts

Now, it is time to consider the remedy of God's grace—the means by which our fallen nature is reformed. The Lord supplements our deficiencies through His assistance. By observing His actions within us, we gain insight into our own impoverishment. When the apostle reassures the Philippians that he is "confident that the One who initiated a virtuous work in them will bring it to completion" (Philippians 1:6), this "initiation of a virtuous work" undoubtedly refers to the inception of their conversion—when their wills were redirected towards God. Herein lies how the Lord commences His work within us: infusing love, desire, and zeal for righteousness into our hearts. To speak more aptly, He inclines, molds, and guides our hearts towards righteousness. This work is fulfilled by confirming our perseverance.

To preclude potential objections asserting that the good is initiated in us due to divine aid supplementing our inherently weak will, the Holy Spirit clarifies elsewhere the capacity of our will in isolation. He declares, "I will give you a new heart, I will create a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart and replace it with a heart of flesh. I will instill My Spirit within you, guiding you to abide by My commandments" (Ezekiel 36:26–27). Who, then, can maintain that the inherent weakness of the human will is strengthened to the point of zealously choosing the good when it is evident that the will necessitates a complete transformation? If a stone can be molded when squeezed, assuming it is malleable enough, to shape it as desired, then I do not contest that the human heart may harbor some capacity and inclination to obey God, provided its inherent frailty is reinforced. However, if through this metaphor, our Lord seeks to illustrate the impossibility of extracting any good from our hearts without rendering them entirely distinct, then let us not share in the praise attributed solely to Him. If, when the Lord converts us to goodness, it equates to transforming a stone into flesh, then surely all contributions arising from our own choice are nullified, and all that follows thereafter originates from God.

Without Heart Renewal, the Will is Powerless

There might be those who acknowledge, "Human will turns towards righteousness and uprightness only through God's power; it has inherently turned away from these attributes. Yet, through preparation by God, the will also engages." St. Augustine expounds that "grace precedes every virtuous action, and in doing good, the

will is guided by grace rather than vice versa; the will follows and does not lead." However, I perceive that the prophet's words yield two outcomes: firstly, the Lord reforms—or rather, dismantles—our corrupt choices; then, He imparts a benevolent will from Himself. Thus, since our choices are anticipated by grace, I concede that they could be deemed as servants. Yet, in their transformation, this is the work of God. Thus, it is inappropriate to attribute to humans that they, through their will, obey prevenient grace. Therefore, St. Chrysostom's assertion that "grace is ineffective without the will, just as the will is ineffective without grace" is not fitting. As for St. Augustine, when he dubbed human will the servant of grace, his intention was not to allot partial praise to the will for good deeds. Instead, he sought to refute the misguided teaching of Pelagius, who made human merit the prime cause of salvation. Thus, St. Augustine demonstrated that grace supersedes all merits, leaving aside the subsequent effect of grace within us—a topic he addresses thoroughly elsewhere. When he repeatedly states, "The Lord precedes the unwilling so they may be willing; He aids the willing so their willingness does not falter," he attributes authorship of all goodness to Him.

Scriptural Evidence

Arriving at the crux of the matter, let us consolidate our understanding and validate it through scriptural evidence. Subsequently, to preclude unwarranted accusations of distorting scripture, we shall demonstrate that this truth we uphold is also in accordance with the teachings of the venerable Augustine. Rather than exhaustively presenting every scriptural testimony that bolsters

our perspective, I propose selecting those that can pave the way for comprehending others. Nonetheless, it would not be remiss to establish my accord with this esteemed individual, rightly revered by the church. Given the premise of God's people's conversion being twofold—namely, the removal of stony hearts and the bestowal of fleshy hearts—He unequivocally attests to the necessity of obliterating any vestige of our own will to lead us towards goodness. Simultaneously, He introduces elements in place of those eradicated, originating from grace. This theme recurs, not solely in one place but throughout Scripture. Jeremiah testifies, "I will give them a heart and a way, that they may fear Me with all their lives," and further, "I will instill My reverence in their hearts to prevent them from turning away from Me" (Jeremiah 32:39-40). Ezekiel echoes a similar sentiment, proclaiming, "I will grant them an undivided heart, and place a new spirit within them; I will remove their heart of stone and grant them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). No other statement could more effectively divest us of the praise for any good or virtuous intention within our wills and attribute it entirely to God than referring to our transformation as the creation of a fresh spirit and heart.

The unassailable conclusion remains that without His intervention, nothing good can emanate from our wills. The Lord Jesus has offered abundant evidence of His grace, sparing us the difficulty of recognizing its presence. He declares, "I am the vine; you are the branches. My Father is the gardener. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. Without Me, you can achieve nothing" (John 15:1, 4–5). Since we do not bear fruit independently any more than a severed branch can thrive without the vine's nourishment, how can we question the fitness of our nature to perform good deeds? This assertion, "Without Him, you can achieve nothing," is

unequivocal. He does not insinuate our frailty in a manner implying inadequacy, but rather reduces us to nothingness, negating any semblance of potency. To elaborate, if grafted into Christ, we yield fruit akin to a branch deriving its vitality from earthly moisture, heavenly dew, and solar warmth. It becomes apparent that no residue of our own agency remains if we are to uphold God's honor in its entirety. Hence, the apostle assigns Him all glory, asserting, "It is God who works in you both to will and to perform His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). Willingness is integral to the inception of virtuous deeds, and subsequent execution is the second part. Both are orchestrated by God. Therefore, any attribution of merit to oneself, be it in the act of willing or in the act of executing, constitutes a theft from God. Even if we assert that God aids our feeble will, a semblance of autonomy is retained. However, stating that God initiates the will underscores that every element of goodness within it originates from beyond us. Yet, due to the weight of our sinful nature, the pure will is hampered and crushed. Consequently, our Lord endows us with constancy and the power to actualize it, surmounting all obstacles. Indeed, the apostle's proclamation that "there is only one God who works all things in all people" (1 Corinthians 12:6) could not be true unless God initiated and perfected every virtuous endeavor within us. Grace ignites the will to embrace the good, stirs the inclination to desire it, and propels the pursuit of it—qualities that endure until fruition. Ultimately, the individual aspires to the good and perseveres in its pursuit until its culmination.

Contrary to long-standing notions, God does not simply stir our will, allowing us the choice to either obey His prompting or resist it. Instead, He moves it with such undeniable efficacy that obedience becomes inevitable. We must not adopt the interpretation often attributed to Chrysostom, who proclaimed, "God draws only those

who wish to be drawn." This suggests that God extends His hand to us, awaiting our desire for His assistance. While it holds true that humanity's initial state allowed for a leaning toward either side, Adam's example revealed the inadequacy and misery of free choice unless God wills within us, orchestrating every facet. Therefore, the limited scope in which some imagine God's grace is distributed, diminishes the grandeur of His grace and taints it with ingratitude. For the apostle does not solely offer the possibility of righteous choice; he proclaims that God actively shapes and creates within us the ability to choose (Philippians 2:13). This implies that God, through His Spirit, steers, transforms, and governs our hearts as His sacred domain. Christ's assertion, "Everyone who has learned from My Father comes to Me" (John 6:45), can only be understood in the context that God's grace possesses the inherent power to bring His work to fruition, as St. Augustine contends. It is not apportioned to each as per the adage, "it is not denied to anyone who does what lies in him." This privilege pertains exclusively to the elect, regenerated by the Spirit of God, guided and governed by Him.

Perseverance a Divine Gift

Let not doubt fester that perseverance is a divine gift. Nevertheless, a flawed belief exists in some hearts, that it is meted out in accordance with one's merit—indicating gratitude for initial grace. This fallacy arises from the notion that our power to accept or reject God's grace presents itself when offered. Yet, this erroneous perspective can be readily debunked. The error is twofold. Firstly, they contend that by properly employing God's initial grace, they deserve further grace as a reward. Secondly, they assert that grace does not operate alone

within us; rather, it collaborates with our efforts. On the former point, we acknowledge that as God multiplies His graces upon His servants, He augments them further due to their pleasing devotion to the initial work He instigates. This perspective resonates with sayings such as, "For whoever has will be given more" (Matthew 13:12), and "Since you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities" (Luke 19:17). However, caution must be exercised on two fronts: we must not attribute to humans the merit of appropriately utilizing God's grace, nor assert that graces bestowed upon the faithful are rewards for proficiently employing the initial grace. To suggest that everything flows from God's gratuitous goodness is imperative. Certainly, the faithful may anticipate blessings when they employ God's graces effectively, leading to the daily addition of new and greater blessings. Yet, I contend that God's goodness initiates the apt use of His gifts, and His benevolence bestows rewards.

The assertion that we subsequently cooperate with God after granting space to the initial grace warrants examination. If it signifies that, once empowered by God to embrace righteousness, we willingly follow the trajectory of His grace, I concur. Undoubtedly, God's grace instills the disposition to obey wherever it manifests. But whence does this emanate if not from God's constant nurturing and fortification of the obedience He initially engendered? Conversely, if it suggests that humans can collaborate with God's grace autonomously, it's a pernicious fallacy. They may then argue, "What did the apostle mean by this: 'But I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me'" (1 Corinthians 15:10)? Ascribing himself preeminence may seem boastful; however, by attributing the labor to the grace of God, he nullifies self-aggrandizement. Some, blinded by this straw, stumble—though possessing stature, they fall. Yet, Paul's intent is clear in the

Greek text, though obscured in the common translation, debunking the misunderstanding.

Grace Does All, According to Augustine

Let us now turn to the words of St. Augustine, silencing the accusations of the modern Pelagians—the sophists of the Sorbonne—who, akin to their forebearer Pelagius, unjustly challenge us by suggesting that the early church fathers are in opposition. This mirrors Pelagius' past efforts to cast doubt upon St. Augustine's teachings. Throughout his work titled "On Rebuke and Grace," St. Augustine addresses this topic, and I shall offer a succinct selection of his words to elucidate his perspective. He writes, "Adam had the ability if he wished, but lacked the will to use it; for us, both the will and the power are bestowed upon us. The initial freedom entailed the power to abstain from sin; the present state is far superior, rendering us incapable of sinning." The Sorbonne adherents attribute this notion to a future life of perfection, which is a derisive notion. St. Augustine promptly refutes this by asserting that the will of the faithful is guided by the Holy Spirit, enabling them to do good because they desire it, and they desire it because God fashioned their will. In his words, "Their will remains, albeit weak, enabling them to do good with God's assistance if they choose. Without this divine intervention, their frail will would succumb to the onslaught of temptations, preventing perseverance. Thus, God aids the feeble human will, directing it to steadfastness, ensuring it cannot waver, and governing it to prevent deviation. Despite its frailty, the will remains steadfast." St. Augustine further contemplates how our hearts ought to follow God's urging when He beckons, asserting,

"God draws people according to their volition, not through coercion. However, it is the will He has shaped within them."

With these words of St. Augustine, the pivotal issue of our discourse stands vindicated. Divine grace is not a mere choice between acceptance or rejection, shaped by individual whim. Instead, it is the sole force that stirs our hearts to follow God's call, evoking both choice and volition. Consequently, all subsequent virtuous deeds bear its fruit, and grace is not received by the living unless it molds their hearts into obedience. For this reason, the same saint declares in another instance, "Only God's grace accomplishes every virtuous deed within us." In certain contexts, he posits that grace does not obliterate the will but rather transforms it from malevolence to benevolence, enabling it to cooperate with grace and act with virtuous intent. Addressing Boniface, he asserts, "We recognize that God's grace is not extended to all, and when it is bestowed, it is not due to merits but is an expression of God's gratuitous kindness. Conversely, its denial stems from divine justice." In the same letter, he strongly repudiates the view that the second grace rewards merit, asserting that those who do not reject the initial grace merit the second. He compels Pelagius to acknowledge that "we require grace for every action, and it is not bestowed as a reward for merit; rather, it is recognized as pure grace."

Swiftly dispelling this matter is found in St. Augustine's "On Rebuke and Grace," in the eighth chapter. Firstly, he expounds that the human will does not acquire grace through freedom, but rather it attains freedom through God's grace. Secondly, he asserts that this grace solidifies the will in virtue, enabling it to love and persevere. Thirdly, he proclaims that the will is fortified with invincible strength to resist evil. Fourthly, he emphasizes that when governed by grace, the will is unwavering, whereas abandonment by grace leads to

immediate faltering. St. Augustine affirms, "Through God's merciful grace, the will is transformed towards virtue and persists therein." He also states, "When the human will is guided to good and confirmed therein, this emanates solely from God's will, not from any merit." Thus, a distinct freedom of choice remains, as St. Augustine underscores in another instance, where turning to and persevering in God is solely through His grace. In this manner, all the actions of the will are ultimately manifestations of grace.

Continuing Sin in the Believer

This divine grace, at times referred to as "deliverance," emancipates us from the shackles of sin. On other occasions, it's termed our "restoration," through which we leave behind our former selves and return to the divine image. It is also known as "regeneration," granting us renewal as new creations. Additionally, it's likened to "resurrection," signifying our death to self and subsequent resurrection by divine power. Yet, it's essential to recognize that this deliverance remains incomplete, a remnant of us lingering under sin's influence. The restoration is not absolute, traces of earthly tendencies persist. Our renewal isn't absolute either; remnants of our old selves endure. Within the confines of our corporeal prison, the residue of our flesh curbs our freedom. Thus, the faithful soul, post-regeneration, becomes a battleground of two forces eternally at odds. Governed by God's Spirit, the soul longs for immortality, propelling it towards righteousness, purity, and holiness. It fixates solely on the blessed realm and aspires to God's presence. However, entangled in earthly vices and impeded by wicked passions, it fails to grasp

genuine desirability and ultimate blessedness. Sin leads it astray from God and righteousness.

This perpetual strife remains a fixture in the faithful individual's life, where the Spirit elevates while the flesh tempts. The Spirit guides the soul towards righteousness, yet the flesh seduces towards sin. It steers towards God, but the flesh tugs backwards. It scorns the world, while the flesh yearns for worldly pleasures. This isn't an abstract concept, detached from our lived experiences; rather, it's a practical reality known to those who are children of God. The conflict between the flesh and the Spirit resembles a duel within the faithful soul. It's a battle wherein the Spirit emerges victorious. The flesh may attempt to undermine the Spirit's work, yet it merely hinders, slows, weakens, or bends, never completely overpowering or quenching the Spirit's vigor.

Such adversities kindle an intense ardor within God's servant, spurring a fervent longing for Him, and nurturing an insatiable desire for His presence. The faithful soul yearns for God with utmost yearning and affections. Despite these tribulations, the regenerate person must persist, directed by God's Spirit, and filled with the aspiration to overcome the obstacles posed by the flesh. St. Paul's affirmation that if we are God's children, we ought to follow the Spirit's guidance, underscores this battle. He signals that the Spirit must ultimately triumph.

The distinction between the natural and the regenerated becomes evident. The natural person may be prodded by conscience against apathy in vice, but they remain content within these vices, embracing them wholeheartedly. They relish their pleasures, indulging them freely, apprehending only the impending punishment for sin. On the other hand, the regenerated individual, their hearts aligned with

righteous laws, despises the sins committed due to human frailty. They abhor such sins, refusing consent. Instead, they find solace in God's law, perceiving greater sweetness in it than worldly pleasures. Their conscience and emotions both oppose evil deeds, leading to an internal struggle.

Certain Anabaptists indulge in fantastical notions, seeking excess rather than spiritual renewal among the faithful. To them, the return of God's children to a state of innocence eliminates the need to restrain the flesh's desires. Instead, they advocate an exclusive allegiance to the Spirit's guidance, convinced that it precludes error. Such ideas are unfathomable, a distortion of reason. However, their propagation exposes their presumption. This monstrous philosophy insinuates the removal of the distinction between virtue and vice, honor and disgrace, righteousness and unrighteousness. Such distinctions, they argue, stem from the old Adam's curse, eradicated by Christ. According to them, no difference exists between fornication and chastity, ignorance and wisdom, truth and falsehood, fairness and extortion. This philosophy trivializes rightful concerns, urging followers to wholeheartedly adhere to the Spirit's guidance without qualms. It's a notion bewildering to behold. Yet, it gains traction among those blinded by concupiscence, having lost their rational faculties. But I implore you, what kind of Christ are they proposing? What sort of Spirit do they envision?

Consider this, for we know one Christ and His Spirit, as proclaimed by the prophets and the gospel. Yet such notions find no place in the realm of these matters. The Spirit portrayed in the Scriptures does not encourage the vices of murder, fornication, drunkenness, pride, contention, excessive desires, or deceit. Rather, the Spirit authors love, chastity, sobriety, peace, moderation, and truth. This Spirit is no whimsical, erratic force, fluttering aimlessly between good and

evil. Instead, He's brimming with wisdom and discernment, distinguishing right from wrong. He does not provoke towards unrestrained indulgence but rather teaches us to embrace goodness and shun the undesirable. Let us not labor needlessly to rebuff these bewildering delusions. The Spirit residing within Christians isn't a fantastical concoction of their imagination, nor is it borrowed from others. It's an embodiment of the sanctification promised to us. It purifies, cleansing impurity and filth, guiding us towards obedience to God's righteousness. Yet, it's essential to acknowledge that much weakness endures within us, confined within these mortal frames.

Given this, as we remain a considerable distance from perfection, our journey requires daily advancement. We grapple with numerous vices, and it's our duty to wrestle against them. Hence, vigilance becomes paramount, a guard against our flesh's potential betrayal. Let us not rest, presuming we are immune to danger. If we dare think ourselves holier than St. Paul, who wrestled with the thorns of Satan, striving for strength through weakness, we deceive ourselves (2 Cor. 12:7, 9). His words bear witness to the struggle between the Spirit and the flesh, a conflict we've discussed (Rom. 7:15ff).

Sinners Captives to Satan

Our argument now stands fortified, proving the captivity beneath sin's yoke, rendering us incapable of choosing good or pursuing it naturally. The distinction between constraint and necessity has been clarified, exposing that even when one sins necessarily, it remains a product of personal choice. However, when it is said that one serves the devil, it implies alignment with devilish pleasure. We must then elucidate this. Moreover, we must address a common quandary—

whether God plays a role in wicked deeds, considering that Scripture often refers to His power being present there.

Regarding the first point, St. Augustine likens the human will to a horse, controlled by its rider's direction. God and the devil, in contrast, are portrayed as riders. God guides orderly, like a skilled horseman. The devil, akin to a reckless rider, leads astray, causing stumbling, rebellion, and disobedience. While the natural person's will is subject to the devil's influence, it doesn't imply forcible obedience, like a slave. Rather, deceived by devilish tactics, it succumbs to the devil's sway. Those not graced by the Lord's governance yield to Satan. St. Paul attests to this, speaking of the devil's rule over the wicked and disobedient (Eph. 2:2). The wicked's blindness and subsequent wrongdoings are termed the devil's work. Yet, the cause lies within the wicked's will—the source of evil, the foundation of sin.

Turning to God's role, the example of the Chaldeans' harm to Job offers clarity. We witness the originators of this evil; thieves who murder and steal. They bear responsibility for their sins. Job recognizes it as God's work, acknowledging his loss of possessions at the hands of the Chaldeans. Can the same action be attributed to God, the devil, and people? Can we reconcile this without exonerating the devil or implicating God in evil? Indeed, if we contemplate intent and method. God's purpose was to test Job's patience through adversity; Satan aimed to plunge him into despair; the Chaldeans sought wealth through theft. The manner of execution displays significant variance. God entrusts Job to Satan for affliction; Satan directs the Chaldeans ordained by God to carry out the act. Satan, with his insidious prodding, incites the already wicked Chaldeans to commit this malevolent act. The Chaldeans, succumbing to evil, stain their souls and bodies.

Indeed, it is fitting to acknowledge that Satan exercises his dominion over the reprobate, within whom the realm of corruption prevails. One might also acknowledge a form of divine involvement, as Satan, an instrument of God's wrath, spurs them according to His will and decree, executing His judgments. I do not refer here to God's universal sustenance and the granting of abilities to creatures. Instead, I address His specific actions manifest in each instance. Thus, it's not incongruous to attribute the same action to God, the devil, and humans. Nonetheless, distinctions in intent and means preserve the integrity of God's righteousness while highlighting the disorder inherent in the wickedness of the devil and humanity.

Scripture Affirms God's Willis Sovereign

Early church scholars occasionally hesitated to reveal this truth, fearing it might provide the wicked with grounds to malign or speak irreverently about God's work. While I commend this caution, Scripture's clarity on the matter dispels any apprehension. Even St. Augustine occasionally voiced reservations, suggesting that the blindness and hardening of the wicked weren't due to God's action, but rather His foreknowledge. However, this nuanced stance clashes with numerous scriptural references. Similarly, the notion that God permits evil without sending it crumbles under scrutiny. Frequently, Scripture asserts that God blinds, hardens, turns, and directs the hearts of the wicked. Attributing these to mere foreknowledge or permission does not suffice. We must, therefore, explore two ways of understanding this.

Firstly, when God's light departs, leaving darkness and blindness, similarly, His Spirit's absence hardens hearts like stone. Without His

guidance, our paths lead astray. Thus, He is deemed responsible for blinding, hardening, and driving those from whom He withdraws the ability to perceive, obey, and perform good.

Secondly, to fulfill His judgments through the devil, God directs the plans of the wicked, influencing their wills and fortifying their strength according to His pleasure. In understanding the first manner, we grasp passages like Job's: "He takes away the tongue from those who speak well and counsel from the old and wise" (Job 12:20). Similarly, St. Paul states: "God sends them the effect of deception so that they may believe a lie" (2 Thess. 2:11). Isaiah queries God's role in hardening hearts, indicating the Lord's involvement in their disposition (Isa. 63:17). Nonetheless, these passages don't detail God's workings but rather His abandonment of individuals. Other passages, however, probe deeper, as in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, where God says He will harden Pharaoh's heart (Exod. 4:21; 7:3), and subsequently confirms and strengthens it (Exod. 10:1). Yet, this hardening is not solely a result of God's absence but rather a deliberate action, involving Satan in its implementation. This dual action further surfaces in the story of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, where the inhabitants of the land displayed hostility. Moses attributes their hostility to the Lord's influence (Deut. 2:30), and the prophet credits the Lord for turning their hearts against His people (Ps. 105:25).

It's clear they did not fall solely due to a lack of God's counsel. When God confirms and directs their actions, it becomes evident that He influences them in some manner. Additionally, when God seeks to punish His people's transgressions through the wicked, He uses them as instruments, demonstrating His power through their actions. Thus, He often declares that He will use unbelievers to chastise Israel (Isa. 5:26; 7:18), comparing them to fishing nets

(Ezek. 12:13; 17:20) and hammers (Jer. 50:23). He also likens Sennacherib, a wicked figure, to an axe, illustrating God's role in directing him for His purpose (Isa. 10:15).

St. Augustine's distinction further elucidates matters: the wicked's sinful acts originate from themselves, while God's intervention shapes the specific actions they commit. While it may seem that God and the devil coalesce in these actions, the devil and the wicked's actions emerge from a place of wickedness. The distinction underscores God's utilization of the wicked for His righteous purposes while emphasizing His power to direct their actions. Thus, the devil and the wicked bear the weight of the wickedness they conceive within their corrupt spirits.

Nonetheless, actions neither inherently good nor evil remain to be discussed, actions pertinent to earthly rather than spiritual life. Some assert that we possess free choice in such matters, likely to avoid unnecessary debate rather than to assert this belief firmly. While I concede that those aware of their inability to justify themselves comprehend what salvation requires, it's crucial not to overlook the special grace required to choose and desire what is beneficial and reject that which harms us.

Without a doubt, God's providence extends not only to the execution of necessary events but also to the inclination of human wills toward the same purpose. Though external events might appear to be under human will and power when viewed through our senses, many testimonies affirm that the Lord governs human hearts even in these matters. Thus, we ought to acknowledge that human power is subject to the unique influence of God's divine direction. Who compelled the Egyptians to lend the people of Israel their most precious belongings (Exod. 11:2–3)? Such actions would not have arisen independently!

This signifies that their hearts were guided more by God than their own inclinations. Who diverted Absalom's heart from heeding Ahithophel's counsel, which was generally accepted like gospel truth (2 Sam. 17:14)? Who swayed Rehoboam to heed the advice of the young men (1 Kings 12:15)?

Doubtless, one might argue that these are isolated instances from which a general principle cannot be inferred. However, these cases sufficiently demonstrate that whenever God intends to manifest His providence, even in external matters, He bends human wills according to His good pleasure. Our choice is not entirely free, for God's rule over it remains regardless of our consent. Daily experience compels us to consider that our hearts are more influenced by God's prompting than our own choice and freedom. Frequently, we lack reason and comprehension in matters that are reasonably comprehensible, yet exhibit courage in the face of uncertainty and danger. How does this occur unless God is at work in both situations? I comprehend Solomon's words in this manner: "The Lord made the ear hear and the eye see" (Prov. 20:12). I believe he addresses not creation here, but the special grace God bestows upon people daily. Solomon also observes that God holds kings' hearts in His hand like a stream of water, guiding them wherever He pleases (Prov. 21:1). Evidently, this doesn't apply to all individuals equally. If any will were exempt from subjugation, it would be that of the king, whose will governs the rest. Therefore, if the king's will is influenced by God, ours certainly isn't exempt. St. Augustine aptly remarks, "Scripture, carefully examined, demonstrates that not only are people's good wills, which God implants in their hearts and directs towards good works and eternal life, under His control, but so are all choices pertaining to the present life. These choices lie so much within His dominion that He guides them to benefit neighbors or to

harm them as punishment when He so desires. All of this occurs through His secret yet just judgment."

It's imperative to remember that one must not evaluate free choice based on how events unfold, as some unenlightened individuals do. They contend that human will is bound because events often don't align with the desires of the most powerful rulers, preventing them from achieving their objectives. This discussion on power and freedom should focus on the inner realm rather than external circumstances. When we address free choice, we don't debate whether it is lawful for individuals to carry out their deliberations unhindered. Instead, we inquire whether individuals possess the free will to discern good from evil in their judgments, to choose one and reject the other. Similarly, we explore whether they possess the freedom in their will to desire, seek, and pursue the good, and to shun and avoid evil. If such freedom exists, then whether imprisoned or reigning, a person remains truly free.

This discussion would be sufficient to address the bondage of the human soul. However, proponents of a false notion of freedom counter our arguments with their opposing views. First, they present illogical claims to vilify our stance, portraying it as contrary to common sense. Subsequently, they employ scriptural references to challenge us. We shall now address their objections in order.

They argue, "If sin is necessitated, it ceases to be sin; if it's voluntary, one can evade it." This argument was famously employed by Pelagius against St. Augustine. Yet, I refrain from dismissing their reasoning due to Augustine's authority. Instead, I seek to refute it. I reject the notion that sin is absolved of its sinful nature when necessitated. I also reject the idea that one can evade sin if it is voluntary. Those who wish to use this pretext to argue against God, claiming they

couldn't act otherwise, will find that God swiftly answers: "Your downfall, Israel, comes from yourself; in Me alone lies your salvation" (Hos. 13:9). What is the root of this perceived lack of power, if not the corruption of human nature? And what precipitated this corruption, if not humanity's departure from their Creator? If all are guilty of this fall, they cannot absolve themselves of evil by invoking necessity. This necessity merely provides justification for their damnation. The second part of their argument, which posits that all voluntary actions are born of complete freedom, doesn't hold true. As we've established earlier, numerous voluntary actions are made without genuine freedom of choice.

Objections

The following argument arises: if vices and virtues do not emanate from free choice, it becomes improper to reward or punish individuals. Though this notion originates from Aristotle, I acknowledge that St. Chrysostom and St. Jerome also touch upon this topic. St. Jerome openly admits that this line of thought was favored by the Pelagians. They attributed these words to them: "If the grace of God works within us, it's that grace which should be rewarded, not us, who are not working." As for God's retribution for transgressions, I respond that we justly merit such punishments due to our responsibility for sin. It matters not whether we sin through free or bound judgment, as long as it arises from voluntary passion. Especially since one is deemed a sinner due to the bondage of sin. Regarding the reward for virtuous deeds, how nonsensical it is to confess that it is bestowed upon us by God's benevolence rather than being wages earned through our merits. St. Augustine frequently

reiterates this sentiment: "God crowns not our merits, but His gifts. The reward bestowed upon us isn't so named because it's owed to our merits, but because it is rendered in compensation for the graces previously granted." Concerning the notion that merits can only stem from a person's own capacity for good works, this notion is misplaced. The Apostle refutes this erroneous notion; he states that blessedness and the eternal glory we anticipate arise from the Lord's mercy, election, calling, and justification. He declares: "Those whom God has chosen, He has called; those whom He has called, He has justified; those whom He has justified, He has glorified" (Rom. 8:30).

So why then are the faithful rewarded? As per the Apostle's explanation, it's due to the Lord's mercy, not their own deeds. Therefore, let this unfounded apprehension dissipate, which asserts that merit vanishes without upholding free choice. It's absurd to flee from a notion that scripture guides us towards. St. Paul cautions: "If you have received everything, why boast as though you have not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). His intent is clear—to eradicate the notion of free choice and diminish all merits. Nevertheless, God, abounding in benevolence, rewards the graces He's bestowed upon us as if they were virtues stemming from us.

Another objection surfaces, seemingly attributed to St. Chrysostom: "If choosing good and evil wasn't within our power, everyone would either be virtuous or wicked, for they share the same nature." This sentiment aligns with the assertion from the book "On the Calling of the Gentiles," often attributed to St. Ambrose. It posits that no one would stray from faith if God's grace didn't render human will mutable. I'm taken aback by how these esteemed figures have been led astray. How could Chrysostom overlook the factor of God's election that differentiates among individuals? It's crucial to

acknowledge that God's choice sets people apart. We needn't hesitate to confess what St. Paul affirms with certainty: "All are corrupt and given over to wickedness." Yet, concurrently, we concur with him that God's mercy aids some so that not all remain in corruption. Since we all suffer from the same ailment, only those for whom God deems a remedy necessary can escape. Those forsaken by God's just judgment remain in their depravity until consumed. The reason why some persist while others falter derives from the same source. Perseverance itself is God's gift, not bestowed indiscriminately but granted to whom He pleases. To inquire about the rationale behind this discrepancy, why some persist while others waver, is to encounter the simple answer: those enduring are upheld by God's might to prevent their demise, while the latter lack this strength, serving as an example of human fickleness.

Furthermore, another argument arises: "Exhortations and admonitions are in vain, and reprimands are futile if sinners lack the ability to obey them." When these objections confronted St. Augustine, he was compelled to write a book titled "On Rebuke and Grace." Though he addressed the matter comprehensively, he ultimately encapsulates it as follows: "O man, recognize your duties from what's commanded, realize your shortcomings from what you're reprimanded for not doing, and acknowledge from whom to seek what you require when you pray to God." We're not alone in advocating this stance; Christ and His apostles share it. Therefore, our opponents should tread carefully when opposing such formidable adversaries. Even though Christ affirms that "without Him, we can do nothing" (John 15:5), He continues to reprove those outside Him for wrongdoing and exhorts each individual to virtuous deeds. St. Paul, sharply reproaching the Corinthians for their lack of charity, subsequently petitions God to grant them love. He attests to the Romans that righteousness is not within a person's will or effort

but arises from God's mercy. Yet, he persistently admonishes, exhorts, and reforms them. Why, then, do these objectors not plead with the Lord: "Do not exert Your efforts in vain, seeking from humans what only You can bestow, and reprimanding them for their failings due to the absence of Your grace?" Are they not admonishing St. Paul to pardon those who lack the power to will or accomplish good, except through God's mercy, which eludes them when they falter? However, this folly is baseless, as God's teaching is founded on sound reasoning and thorough contemplation.

Indeed, St. Paul indicates that teaching, exhortations, and reprimands alone have limited power to transform the heart. He asserts that "the one who plants is nothing, and the one who waters is nothing, but all effectiveness comes from the Lord, who gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:7). "Then what purpose do exhortations serve?" one might ask. If these exhortations are disregarded by a stubborn heart, they stand as witnesses against that individual, serving as evidence during divine judgment. Even a troubled conscience is stirred and compelled in this life; though it may mock these exhortations, it cannot condemn them. If someone argues, "What recourse does the unfortunate sinner have when the required disposition of heart to obey is denied to them?" I reply: How can they equivocate when they are solely responsible for their hard-heartedness? Therefore, even though the wicked wish God's precepts and warnings were illusions (if that were possible), they're compelled by the efficacy of these teachings and admonitions, regardless of their inclination. The primary utility of precepts and warnings should be regarded as valuable for the faithful. Although the Lord accomplishes everything through His Spirit, He employs the instrument of His word to effect His work within them, using it as a potent tool. When it's established, as it should be, that the power of the righteous resides in God's grace, someone might inquire: "Why

are they encouraged to fulfill their duty instead of being solely guided by the Holy Spirit? Why are they impelled by exhortations, when they cannot move faster than the Spirit propels them? Why are they corrected when they stumble, considering they necessarily faltered due to the frailty of their flesh?" The answer is this: Who are you to impose laws upon God? If God wishes to prepare us through exhortation to receive the grace needed to heed His exhortation, what grounds do you have to reprove or critique this order and manner? Even if exhortations solely serve to incriminate the faithful of their sins, they should not be dismissed as worthless. These exhortations possess great value in kindling love for righteousness within the heart and cultivating a distaste for sin. As the Holy Spirit utilizes this external instrument for the salvation of individuals, who would dare dismiss these exhortations as superfluous?

Should anyone seek a clearer response, I shall succinctly provide the conclusion. God operates within us twofold: inwardly through His Spirit, and outwardly through His Word. Through His Spirit, illuminating the intellect and cultivating hearts with love for righteousness and innocence, He rejuvenates individuals into new beings. Through His Word, He stirs and motivates people to yearn for and seek this renewal. In both ways, His mighty hand is evident, as He deems appropriate. Even when He directs His Word to the wicked and disheartened, though it might not lead them to reform, it serves a purpose. Presently, it presses on their consciences, and on the day of judgment, they shall possess fewer excuses.

Endeavoring to overcome us with a multitude of texts if they cannot surpass us in quality, these individuals diligently gather numerous scriptural testimonies. It's akin to a commander assembling a host unprepared for battle, seeking to intimidate the adversary. They make a grand display before being set in action; yet, when combat

ensues, they scatter at the first challenge. Thus, dismantling these objections, which are mere spectacle and vanity, shall prove straightforward. These objections can be categorized, and once categorized, a comprehensive response will satisfactorily address numerous instances. There's no need to individually address each one. Constructing an extensive chain of God's precepts, they gauge human capability. They reason: "Either God jests when commanding virtues like holiness, piety, obedience, chastity, love, and kindness, or He merely requires what's within our power." However, these amassed precepts fall into three categories: some encourage turning towards God, others promote adherence to the law, and some encourage perseverance in received grace.

Let us address these categories collectively before considering specifics. I concede that the practice of measuring human capabilities by divine commands has historical precedence, seemingly reasonable at first glance. Nevertheless, this perspective originates from profound ignorance. Those aiming to disprove the feasibility of these commandments if human adherence is impossible present a feeble argument. They claim that otherwise, the law would be given in vain. Yet, St. Paul addresses this matter directly. I ask, what do these statements signify? "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20). "Through the law we become conscious of our sin" (Romans 3:20). The law engenders sin; it multiplies transgressions (Romans 7:8). These passages do not suggest that the law must be proportionate to our abilities to avoid being futile. St. Paul uses these passages to demonstrate that God commands what exceeds our capacity to reveal our inherent powerlessness.

If Scripture solely affirmed the law as the standard for life, measuring our actions, I would readily concur. Yet, since Scripture

expounds multiple uses for itself, we should adhere to this interpretation rather than personal conjecture. While the law prescribes our obligations, it simultaneously emphasizes that the ability to obey emanates from God's grace. Thus, it teaches us to seek grace through prayer. The presence of promises alongside commandments underscores our reliance on God's assistance. These promises reveal that our power originates solely from His grace, unequivocally underscoring not only our insufficiency but our complete incapacity to fulfill the law. Let us not linger on the proportion between our strength and God's commandments, as if God tailored the righteousness He imparted according to our limitations. Instead, let the promises remind us of our inadequacy, highlighting our constant need for His grace.

They inquire, "To whom did God direct His law? Do you mean to suggest it was to inanimate objects like wood and stones?" I answer, none contend such a notion, as the wicked are neither wood nor stones. Upon encountering God's law, they, conscious of their concupiscence's defiance against God, bear guilt in their consciences. Likewise, when the faithful are alerted to their fragility, they seek refuge in God's grace. What of the words of St. Augustine: "God commands what we cannot achieve so that we recognize what we should seek from Him." And, "Precepts are incredibly useful if they honor God's grace." And, "Faith obtains what the law commands." "God demands faith from us and doesn't find what He seeks unless He's already placed it within us." "May God grant what He commands and command what He wills."

Our argument gains clarity when examining these three categories of commandments. Throughout His law and prophetic writings, the Lord frequently urges us to turn to Him. However, the prophets respond from a different angle: "Turn me back, O Lord, and I shall

be turned. For after You have turned me, I repented" (Jeremiah 31:18). He commands the circumcision of hearts (Jeremiah 4:4), yet Moses testifies that He personally performs this circumcision (Deuteronomy 30:6). Repeatedly, He enjoins people to obtain new hearts, while testifying that He alone renews the heart (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33). Thus, what shall those who quote God's precepts to extol human ability, constraining God's grace that enables command fulfillment, assert now?

The second category involves straightforward precepts: to honor God, follow His will, observe His commandments, and heed His teachings. Countless testimonies highlight that all righteousness, holiness, piety, and purity are gratuitous gifts from God.

The third category presents itself in St. Paul and St. Barnabas' exhortation to remain steadfast in God's grace (Acts 13:43). Elsewhere, St. Paul underscores the source of this strength, admonishing: "Finally, be strong in the Lord" (Ephesians 6:10). He also cautions against grieving the Holy Spirit, in whom we're sealed for the day of redemption (Ephesians 4:30). Yet, what he commands elsewhere, he implores of the Lord through prayer, acknowledging its lack within human power. He beseeches the Lord to make the Thessalonians worthy of His calling and to fulfill His good intentions in them (2 Thessalonians 1:11). Certain individuals, fervently adhering to their misguided beliefs, challenge these testimonies. They argue that these testimonies do not negate the possibility of uniting human effort with God's grace to alleviate our weaknesses. They present passages from the prophets where God seemingly divides the responsibility for conversion between Himself and us, as seen in, "Return to Me, and I will return to you" (Zechariah 1:3; Malachi 3:7). We've previously addressed the help provided by God, and revisiting this matter within this context would be redundant.

The focus here is to reveal the futility of attributing to individuals the ability to fulfill the law merely because God mandates obedience. It is evident that God's grace is indispensable to accomplish His commands, and it is promised for this very purpose. As for the previously mentioned passage, it doesn't substantiate their misconception. God's "returning" does not denote the grace renewing our hearts for righteous living; rather, it signifies His benevolence and love, expressing prosperity and confirming that, by returning to a righteous life, we draw near to Him, who embodies righteousness. Therefore, it is misguided to distort this passage to contend that our conversion is divided between God and us. This issue requires a more in-depth examination, which we shall undertake in the chapter addressing the law.

The second cluster of arguments bears resemblance to the first. They bring forth promises that seemingly imply God's accord with our will. These passages include: "Seek righteousness, not wickedness, and you shall live" (Amos 5:14); "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword" (Isaiah 1:19–20); "If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, to me you should return" (Jeremiah 4:1); "If you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments... you shall be blessed in the city and blessed in the field" (Deuteronomy 28:1; Leviticus 26:3), and others akin to these. Their argument suggests that God would jest if these were referred to our will without being achievable. Their point carries an air of courteous compassion. One could deduce: "It would be unjust for God to suggest that our position in His grace depends solely on us to receive all goodness from Him when we lack the power to do so. Presenting unattainable blessings in this manner would render His promises nonsensical." In essence, one might claim that God's promises lack credibility if they hinge on an impossibility.

Concerning promises linked to unattainable conditions, their treatment shall come later, revealing that despite impossibility, no absurdity exists.

In the context at hand, I reject the notion that the Lord displays cruelty or inhumanity by urging us to merit His graces and blessings, knowing we lack the capacity to do so. The promises extend to both the faithful and the errant, benefiting both parties. As the Lord's precepts prod and stir the consciences of the wicked, preventing them from dismissing His judgment carelessly, promises to them underline their unworthiness of His benevolence. Is it not fitting for God to reward those who honor Him and chastise those who belittle His majesty? Thus, God rightfully presents these conditions to the wicked, captivated by sin's yoke. When they forsake their sinful ways, He promises to bestow blessings. Even if this were the sole rationale, God acts to illustrate that the wicked must be excluded from the blessings destined for His servants. Moreover, in inciting His faithful to earnestly seek His grace, it is unsurprising if He employs the same approach in His promises as previously demonstrated in His commandments. While His precepts inform us of His will, exposing our imperfections, and urging us to implore His Spirit to guide us, these promises, through their gentleness, kindle love for His commands. The more our hearts embrace righteousness, the more fervent our pursuit of God's grace. Thus, through the cited declarations, God neither attributes to us the ability to accomplish what He states nor derides our frailty. Rather, these declarations benefit His servants and remove excuses from the wicked.

Their third group of arguments possesses some parallels to the previous ones. They present passages where God conveys to the people of Israel that their circumstances rely solely on their choices. For instance, He stated: "The Amalekites and Canaanites are right in

front of you, and you will die by their swords since you've turned away from the Lord" (Numbers 14:43). Also, "Because I called and you did not answer, I will destroy you just as I did Shiloh" (Jeremiah 7:13–14). Furthermore, "This people has not obeyed the voice of their God or received discipline. Truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips" (Jeremiah 7:28–29). Lastly, "You have done worse than your fathers, each one of you following his stubborn, evil will, refusing to obey Me. So I will hurl you out of this land into a land that you do not know" (Jeremiah 16:12–13). They ask: "How are these accusations relevant to those who could respond, 'We desired prosperity and feared adversity. The reason we did not obey the Lord or heed His voice to evade misfortune and attain blessings is our captivity in sin. It's unjust for God to accuse us of the misfortunes we suffer, misfortunes beyond our control!'" Setting aside this trivial and baseless excuse of necessity, can they absolve themselves of wrongdoing? If they admit their failings, God's assertion that their lack of prosperity results from their perversity is not without cause. Allow me to question further: can they deny that their corrupt will is the source of their transgressions? If they acknowledge this internal origin of evil, why do they seek external causes, attempting to deflect responsibility, pretending to be innocent of their own destruction?

Should it indeed hold true that sinners, through their own iniquity, are stripped of God's blessings and subjected to His retribution, then it follows that these accusations rightly find their place. By such reproaches, should they persist in their wickedness, they might learn to attribute their misery to their transgressions rather than leveling blame at God's alleged severity. If not entirely hardened, and should they foster a teachable spirit within, may they recognize the blemish of their sins as the root cause of their adversity. Thus, moved by displeasure and disdain for their transgressions, they could retrace their steps onto the path of goodness. This would entail

acknowledging God's rebuke as truthful and reliable. The faithful can glean from Daniel's prayer that such dialogues effectively served this purpose (Daniel 9:4ff). The first beneficial outcome can be witnessed among the Jews. Compliant with God's command, Jeremiah revealed to them the source of their distress (Jeremiah 7:13). However, let us remember that nothing occurs without God's prior declaration. His foretelling of conveying His message, which they would disregard, and summoning them, which they would ignore, holds true (Jeremiah 7:27–28). A counterargument might arise: "What purpose lies in addressing the deaf?" The purpose is to ensure that, despite their delusion, they realize the veracity. It is heinous sacrilege to fault God for calamities originating within them. By employing these three approaches, the ceaseless array of testimonies the opponents of God's grace gather from the commandments, promises, and admonishments to sinners becomes manageable. These adversaries, striving to establish the concept of free will within humanity—a concept unattainable—can be countered through these conclusions.

Yet, these individuals assert a testimony from Moses' law that seems to contradict our earlier deduction. After promulgating the law, Moses affirmed before the people, "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off... But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deuteronomy 30:11, 14). If these words were aimed solely at the commandments, I acknowledge it would pose a challenge to counter. While one could argue that these words pertain to the ability to comprehend the commandments rather than execute them, reservations persist. However, we possess a sound interpreter who eradicates all ambiguity—namely, St. Paul. He expounds that Moses referred to the teachings of the gospel (Romans 10:6–8). Should an obstinate individual claim that St. Paul distorted the passage's natural meaning to align it with the gospel (an assertion

unworthy of tolerance), we can defend the apostle's exposition. If Moses exclusively referred to commandments, he would deceive the people with false confidence. What could they do other than bring about their own demise if they attempted to adhere to the law using their own strength, deeming it facile? In the context of human nature's inherent frailty and our susceptibility to falter, where do we find the capacity to uphold the law? It becomes increasingly evident that Moses understood these words in light of the covenant of mercy he established through the law. Pondering the salvation offered through the gospel, Moses visualized an alternative to the rigorous, arduous, even unattainable conditions the law imposed. St. Paul, therefore, employs this testimony to underscore God's merciful offering, rendering this testament inadequate to substantiate the notion of human free will.

Additional passages are often cited, illustrating instances when God temporarily withholds His grace to assess the direction individuals choose. For example, Hosea declares: "I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face" (Hosea 5:15). They contend, "It would be absurd for the Lord to contemplate humanity's course of action unless their hearts possessed the capacity to incline, propelled by their own volition." Such a notion overlooks the fact that through His prophets, God frequently declares that He will cast out His people and forsake them until they rectify their ways. Let us scrutinize the argument they wish to present. Should they assert that people, abandoned by God, can rectify themselves, all of scripture contradicts them. Should they concede that God's grace is essential for a person's conversion, these passages fail to serve their purpose against us. However, they may maintain that they accept the necessity of grace in conjunction with human capacity. Their proof, however, is not derived from these passages or their equivalents. These passages address two distinctly

separate matters: temporarily withdrawing divine grace to observe their subsequent actions, and supporting human weakness to bolster its limited strength.

In response to their inquiry, "What do such modes of expression signify?" Let me elucidate: they hold as much weight as if God conveyed, "Given that this obstinate populace remains unresponsive to my counsel, exhortations, and reproofs, I shall momentarily withdraw. During my silence, I shall allow affliction to befall them. Thus, I shall discern whether, after enduring prolonged tribulation, they will recall me and earnestly seek my presence." Understand that when it is said God "withdraws," it denotes the removal of His divine word. When it is stated that He "observes" their actions during His absence, it signifies that He afflicts them without manifesting His presence. This twofold approach serves to humble us. Left unchecked, His chastisements and penalties would lead to our utter destruction instead of rectification, were it not for His Spirit rendering us receptive to instruction. Thus, the inference that a person possesses the ability to turn to God, based on the notion that God, offended by our stubborn hearts, withholds His word through which He communicates His presence, and watches our actions in His absence, is unfounded. These actions solely aim to reveal that our capacity is nonexistent.

Another argument arises from the common parlance employed not only by individuals but also within scripture. Good deeds are referred to as "ours," and we are said to "do good," just as we "do evil." They contend, "If sins are correctly attributed to us as originating from us, the same reasoning mandates that we be credited for good deeds. It is illogical to claim that, since we cannot accomplish them through our own agency, we act as lifeless stones manipulated by God's influence in our endeavors." Consequently, they conclude, "While

God's grace remains the principal force, such forms of speech suggest that we possess inherent capacity for goodness." Confronted solely with the initial objection—namely, that good deeds are attributed to us—I would respond thus: daily sustenance, the bread we beseech God to bestow upon us, we term as "ours" (Matthew 6:11; Luke 11:3). This term can be interpreted only to imply that what is unearned becomes ours through God's boundless benevolence. Hence, they must either censure our Lord for employing such phrases or relinquish their surprise at labeling good works as "ours," despite our minimal contribution solely facilitated by God's generosity.

However, their subsequent argument warrants more consideration. They contend, "Scripture frequently affirms that the faithful serve God, uphold His righteousness, adhere to His law, and dedicate themselves to goodness. As these actions are inherent responsibilities of human intellect and will, how can we attribute such qualities to both God's Spirit and ourselves, unless there exists a connection between our capacity and God's grace?" To effectively counter these arguments, we must accurately comprehend the manner in which God operates within His servants. Primarily, their chosen metaphor lacks applicability. Who could entertain the notion that humans are propelled by God in the same manner one hurls a stone? This sentiment fails to align with our doctrine. We assert the existence of a natural human capability to approve, reject, desire, abstain, endeavor, and resist—namely, to approve futility, reject authentic goodness, desire malevolence, abstain from desiring good, strive to embrace sin, and resist righteousness. To what extent is the Lord implicated in these actions? Should He utilize human waywardness as an instrument of His wrath, He molds and guides it according to His will, manipulating a wicked hand to execute His righteous and benevolent works. Thus, should we regard a wicked individual who serves God in this capacity, despite intending to

indulge in wickedness, as analogous to a motionless stone? The disparities between these concepts are undeniable.

Our contemplation then shifts to the virtuous individuals, who merit deeper examination. When the Lord aspires to establish His realm within them, He restrains and governs their volition to prevent it from yielding to unruly impulses. This contravenes their inherent inclinations. Simultaneously, He molds their volition, channels and steers it according to the compass of His righteousness, prompting a yearning for sanctity and purity. Ultimately, He reinforces and fortifies their volition through the potency of His Spirit, ensuring steadfastness and resilience. This intricate process demonstrates that God's grace functions akin to a guide and a bridle for the human will, steering and governing it. To govern the will necessitates correction, reform, and rejuvenation. This conveys that the inception of our rebirth involves the eradication of our natural inclinations. Furthermore, rectifying the will necessitates guiding, inciting, directing, and sustaining it. Therefore, we assert that all deeds emanating from the will originate exclusively from Him. Yet, we do not negate the wisdom conveyed by St. Augustine: "God's grace does not obliterate our will but rather restores it." These sentiments harmonize perfectly. To affirm that the human will is restored implies that it is recalibrated, shifted towards the compass of righteousness after its inherent iniquity is rectified. It is then that it is directed toward goodness and purity. This restoration spawns a new will within the individual, as the inherent will is so profoundly tainted that complete renewal becomes imperative. Concluding, we find no hindrance to asserting that the works wrought by God's Spirit within us are the same works that we enact, despite not actively cooperating with His grace using our inherent strength. The rationale is twofold. Firstly, all that God performs within us, He desires to be inherently ours, albeit with the understanding that it is

not a result of our doing. Secondly, our inherent intellect, volition, and determination are guided towards goodness and utilized for noble purposes, a trait inherited from our natural disposition.

Other contentions they draw from diverse sources may not perturb those of discerning judgment, particularly if the previously provided solutions to these quandaries are well-remembered. They reference a passage from Genesis: "Your desire will be under you, and you will rule over it" (Genesis 4:7), interpreting it in relation to sin. They propose that God promised Cain the authority to subdue sin within his heart, provided he exhibited the will to conquer it. Conversely, we might assert that this assertion more fittingly applies to Abel. In this context, God seeks to reprimand the hatred that Cain harbored for his brother—a sentiment fueled by two factors. Initially, Cain deluded himself into aspiring for a loftier station before God than his brother, disregarding that God esteems only righteousness and integrity. Subsequently, he manifested ingratitude for the blessings bestowed by God, to the extent that he bore animosity towards his brother—a brother entrusted to his care. However, for the sake of impartiality and to avoid the appearance of evading opposing interpretations, let us concede that God refers to sin. In that case, the premise remains unchanged: God's address constitutes an exhortation to Cain, delineating his duty rather than his capacity, even if he finds it unattainable. They further fortify their standpoint with the apostle's declaration that "salvation is not in the hand of the one who wills or the one who runs but in God's mercy" (Romans 9:16). Hence, they deduce the existence of a human will and endeavor in conjunction with God's mercy. Yet, were they to thoughtfully contemplate the context of this passage, their facile application of its concepts would subside. I acknowledge their possible reliance on Origen and St. Jerome to validate their interpretation. Nevertheless, the focus should be on comprehending

St. Paul's intended message: that salvation exclusively emanates from God's mercy. Destruction and chaos await those bypassed by His election. This notion finds illustration through the story of Pharaoh, a symbol of the rejected (Romans 9:17). St. Paul also underscores the unwavering and gratuitous election of the faithful using Moses' testimony, "I will have compassion on the one whom I have received in mercy." Consequently, he concludes that salvation hinges not on human volition or effort, but solely on God's mercy (Romans 9:15ff). Any attempt to construe these words as indicative of inherent human capacity is flawed and foolish. Therefore, we must dismiss this illogical sophistry.

The rationale behind declaring, "Salvation is not in the hand of the one willing or running," in order to advocate the presence of a will and activity, lacks coherence. St. Paul's assertion is more straightforward: salvation is not achieved through human will or effort, but solely through the realm of mercy (Romans 9:16). This principle mirrors St. Paul's sentiment in a different passage, where he asserts, "God's kindness and love toward humanity manifested not through deeds of righteousness which we pursued, but through His boundless mercy" (Titus 3:4-5). Were I to argue that we indeed perform good deeds based on this premise, negating St. Paul's statement that God's grace does not emerge from deeds of righteousness, they would undoubtedly dismiss my contention. Their current argument parallels this approach. Thus, they must carefully contemplate their assertions, refraining from reliance on such baseless reasoning.

Subsequently, they invoke the testimony of Ecclesiasticus, an author whose authority is contested. However, even if we concede this point, its inclusion offers no validation for their argument. Ecclesiasticus contends that "after his creation, man was left to his own will. God

imparted commandments, and by obeying them, man would safeguard himself. Life and death, good and evil, were presented, allowing man to choose as he pleased" (Ecclesiasticus 15:14ff). According to this account, humanity possessed the ability to select either life or death at its inception. What if we postulate that this capacity was subsequently lost? I am not interested in contradicting Solomon, who affirms that "humans were created virtuous from the outset and subsequently succumbed to iniquity" (Ecclesiastes 7:29). Consequently, as humanity deviated from its original state and strayed from God, its inherent goodness deteriorated alongside all other virtues. Any references to humanity's primordial creation should not be applied to its current state, marred by imperfection and corruption. Hence, I counter both our adversaries and Ecclesiasticus, whoever the author may be, in the following manner: should you intend to instruct individuals to seek within themselves the capacity for salvation, your authority is insufficient to undermine the Word of God, which undeniably contradicts your premise. Should your purpose be solely to rebuke the flesh's blasphemy—given its inclination to attribute its vices to God, thereby absolving itself—by showcasing humanity's virtuous origin and its subsequent downfall, I am inclined to accept this notion. However, we must mutually agree that humanity, in its current state, has been stripped of the adornments and graces initially bestowed by God.

One recurring point of contention our adversaries present is the parable of the compassionate Samaritan, where a man left half-dead on the road serves as a metaphor for the human condition (Luke 10:30-35). Admittedly, it's a common interpretation that this man symbolizes humanity's plight. From this, they deduce a particular argument: humanity wasn't utterly incapacitated by sin and the devil, as indicated by the man's partial vitality. Their assertion claims that within the depths of our struggle, some semblance of

understanding and will remains intact. However, should I choose to disregard their allegorical approach, what course of action could they possibly pursue? It's undeniable that the early Church fathers adhered to a literal and straightforward interpretation of this passage. Allegorical interpretations ought to be accepted only insofar as they derive from Scripture itself, and even then, they hold no weight in establishing doctrinal truths. Furthermore, we possess ample reasons to refute their contentions. Scripture itself dismisses the notion of a half-life for humanity, asserting instead that in matters concerning genuine and eternal felicity, we are utterly lifeless. St. Paul, when discussing our redemption, doesn't attest to healing us from partial death; rather, he proclaims our resurrection from death itself (Ephesians 2:5). He summons not those who are partially alive to embrace Christ's grace, but those who are deceased and interred. This aligns with the Lord's declaration: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). Do they not find it disconcerting to pit their allegorical interpretations, no matter how illuminating, against an array of abundant and unequivocal testimonies?

Yet, even if we were to entertain their allegory as valid, what conclusion could they conceivably draw against us? Their argument posits that humanity is partially alive, thus implying the preservation of some form of vitality. I concede that the human soul possesses the capacity for understanding, although this comprehension might not reach the celestial wisdom of God. Judgment regarding good and evil resides within us, and an inkling of awareness concerning God's existence may exist, albeit without attaining accurate knowledge. Nevertheless, what substantial impact do these observations exert? Regrettably, they fall short of nullifying the sagacious words of St. Augustine: "The gratuitous gifts essential to salvation were forfeited

after humanity's fall; the inherent qualities incapable of leading to salvation were tainted and besmirched." Consequently, St. Augustine's assertion remains impervious: the human intellect is so profoundly alienated from God's righteousness that it can fathom, conceive, or apprehend nothing beyond wickedness, sin, and corruption. Similarly, the human heart is irreparably tainted by sin, rendering it the progenitor of all things corrupt. Even if certain actions may appear virtuous, the intellect invariably remains entangled in hypocrisy and vanity, and the heart persistently indulges in malevolence.

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