

# The Freedom of a Christian      Martin Luther, Fall 1520

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Background timeline:

- 1517, October – Luther posts the 95 Theses in Wittenberg
- 1518, April – Luther presents his theology to fellow Augustinians at Heidelberg
- 1518, October – Luther resists Cardinal Cajetan’s attempts to make him recant at Augsburg
- 1519, June – Luther debates with Eck at Leipzig, says Christ is the only head of the church
- 1520, June – Luther is threatened to recant or be excommunicated by Pope Leo X
- 1520, August – *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* is published
- 1520, October – *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* is published
- 1520, October – Luther writes *On the Freedom of a Christian* along with a letter to Pope Leo X

**A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.**

**A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.**

*What do you think each statement means?*

*How do you think the two statements fit together?*

These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul’s own statements, who says in 1 Cor. 9[:19], “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all,” and in Rom. 13[:8], “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was “born of woman, born under the law” [Gal. 4:4], and therefore was at the same time a free man and a servant, “in the form of God” and “of a servant” [Phil. 2:6–7].

Let us start, however, with something more remote from our subject, but more obvious. Man has a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily one. According to the spiritual nature, which men refer to as the soul, he is called a spiritual, inner, or new man. According to the bodily nature, which men refer to as flesh, he is called a carnal, outward, or old man, of whom the Apostle writes in 2 Cor. 4[:16], “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.” Because of this diversity of nature the Scriptures assert contradictory things concerning the same man, since these two men in the same man contradict each other, “for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh,” according to Gal. 5[:17].

First, let us consider the inner man to see how a righteous, free, and pious Christian, that is, a spiritual, new, and inner man, becomes what he is. It is evident that no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom, or in producing unrighteousness or servitude. A simple argument will furnish the proof of this statement. What can it profit the soul if the

body is well, free, and active, and eats, drinks, and does as it pleases? For in these respects even the most godless slaves of vice may prosper. On the other hand, how will poor health or imprisonment or hunger or thirst or any other external misfortune harm the soul? Even the most godly men, and those who are free because of clear consciences, are afflicted with these things. None of these things touch either the freedom or the servitude of the soul. It does not help the soul if the body is adorned with the sacred robes of priests or dwells in sacred places or is occupied with sacred duties or prays, fasts, abstains from certain kinds of food, or does any work that can be done by the body and in the body. The righteousness and the freedom of the soul require something far different since the things which have been mentioned could be done by any wicked person. Such works produce nothing but hypocrites. On the other hand, it will not harm the soul if the body is clothed in secular dress, dwells in unconsecrated places, eats and drinks as others do, does not pray aloud, and neglects to do all the above-mentioned things which hypocrites can do.

**It is evident that no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom, or in producing unrighteousness or servitude.**

*Prove that statement.*

Furthermore, to put aside all kinds of works, even contemplation, meditation, and all that the soul can do, does not help. One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ, as Christ says, John 11[:25], "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live"; and John 8[:36], "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed"; and Matt. 4[:4], "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing. This is why the prophet in the entire Psalm [119] and in many other places yearns and sighs for the Word of God and uses so many names to describe it.

*"The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD" (Amos 8:11 NIV).*

*Why is this famine the most terrible disaster that could happen?*

The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God, according to Rom. 10[:9]: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Furthermore, "Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified" [Rom. 10:4]. Again, in Rom. 1[:17], "He who through faith is righteous shall live." The Word of God cannot be

received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith. Therefore it is clear that, as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works; for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith.

**The moment you begin to have faith you learn that all things in you are altogether blameworthy, sinful, and damnable.**

*If you are already a Christian, why do you need the gospel?*

It ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly to strengthen faith alone and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ Jesus, who suffered and rose for him, as Peter teaches in the last chapter of his first Epistle (1 Pet. 5:10). No other work makes a Christian. Thus when the Jews asked Christ, as related in John 6[:28], what they must do “to be doing the work of God,” he brushed aside the multitude of works which he saw they did in great profusion and suggested one work, saying, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” [John 6:29]; “for on him has God the Father set his seal” [John 6:27].

Therefore true faith in Christ is a treasure beyond comparison which brings with it complete salvation and saves man from every evil, as Christ says in the last chapter of Mark [16:16]: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”...Paul says, Rom. 10[:10], “For man believes with his heart and so is justified.”

*According to John chapter 6, what is the work of God?*

Here we must point out that the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises. Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability...

Here the second part of Scripture comes to our aid, namely, the promises of God which declare the glory of God, saying, “If you wish to fulfil the law and not covet, as the law demands, come, believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you. If you believe, you shall have all things; if you do not believe, you shall lack all things.” That which is impossible for you to accomplish by trying to fulfil all the works of the law—many and useless as they all are—you will accomplish quickly and easily through faith. God our Father has made all things depend on faith so that whoever has faith will have everything, and whoever does not have faith will have nothing. “For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all,” as it is stated in Rom. 11[:32]. Thus the promises of God give what the commandments of God demand and fulfil what the law prescribes so that all things may be God’s alone, both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments. He alone commands, he alone fulfils.

*Agree or disagree? God would not tell us to do anything we are not capable of doing.*

**God alone commands, he alone fulfills.**

*What freedom is there in that statement?*

It is clear, then, that a Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law. It is true that “the law is not laid down for the just” [1 Tim. 1:9]. This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man’s righteousness and salvation.<sup>1</sup>

**A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.**

*Where do you see this statement coming through in the paragraph above?*

**A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.**

*Where do you find this statement hinted at in the paragraph above?*

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, M. (1999). *Luther’s works, vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 31, pp. 327–377). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.