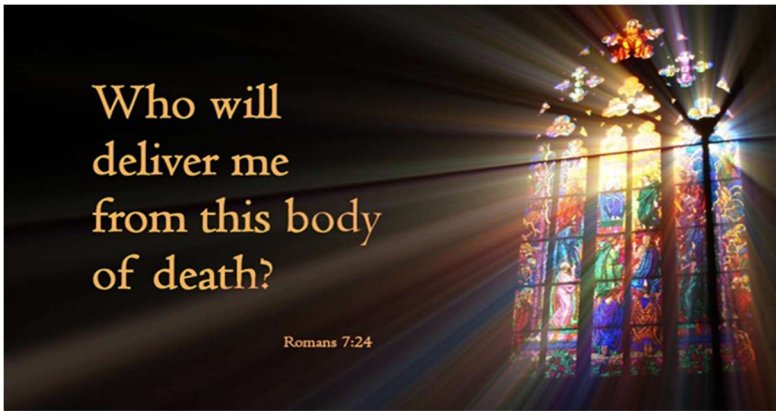


Pentecost 5-July 5, 2020  
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish  
Romans 7:15-25 and Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

## “Free? Will”

-Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad



*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*It would be much easier to just ignore the words that we heard from the apostle Paul this morning. It is one thing to ignore or to dismiss what Paul teaches, but most people, in fact most Christians, outright disagree with his teaching. If you asked most people who confess that they are Christians, the following question: “Has God given you the power to have a free will? Or another way to ask this same question would be, “Does God give you the power to choose right from wrong? “It is without a doubt, a very high percentage of people being asked this question would respond with a resounding, “YES”. This question addressed by Paul in Romans either sets you free or puts you in bondage. We often want to apply the rules of this world where making the right choices leads to success and prosperity and poor decisions lead to problems and poverty. So, whenever the topic of “free will” comes up in religion, we think God uses the same economic scales for our salvation as we do here on earth. I remember this topic coming up with an elderly couple who throughout their long lives had listened to many Lutheran preachers in many churches and they took great pride in the many wise decisions they had made in their lives and they were confident that Jesus was proud of their decisions too. They, like many people, believe their salvation hung in the balance until they made the decision to follow Jesus. Paul shoots this “free will” theology full of holes as he centers on what our “will” really wants to do.*

*This was the center of the debate between Martin Luther and a Dutch philosopher Desiderius Erasmus who attempted to apply his philosophical beliefs into scripture. Luther congratulated Erasmus for quickly finding the focal point, the nerve center, or as Luther described it, the jugular vein in the difference in their beliefs about God. Erasmus argued that God would not have given us all of the commandments if there were no possibility of fulfilling them. Luther rebuked back that if we could keep the commandments, there would be no need of Jesus. This confusion that there is freedom by placing the power to choose right from wrong instead of bondage is only put to rest by hearing what Jesus teaches.*

*From the beginning, Adam and Eve did not choose what God told them to do or not to do. After God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and Jonah left up his own choosing, headed the opposite direction of where God commanded him. Paul did not choose to preach Jesus in the beginning. Paul persecuted followers of Jesus. Even after Paul was struck blind by Jesus himself, he was not given the power to choose wisely between good and evil. Paul begins this chapter in Romans, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” If Jesus gives his followers a free will, it doesn’t sound like Paul is doing well with this freedom. Is Paul the only one who doesn’t*

*understand his own actions? Or does his problem of doing the opposite of what he wants to do apply to each one of us? Should we ignore these teachings of Paul whose will was “bound” to sin rather than “free” to make good choices in life?*

*Most people who believe they have a free will also believe that for the most part they make good choices in this life. Sure, they might confess that occasionally they might slip up, but since God has given them a “free” will, they like Erasmus believe God also empowers them to do what is right. This often is the reason why parents send their children to Sunday School and confirmation. They want the church to teach their children to choose right over wrong.*

*Paul never boasted of his success rate in choosing. Instead, he confessed that he had a 0% success rate. Paul said that he didn’t do what he wanted but did the very thing that he hated to do. Paul said that NOTHING good dwells within him, only sin. And if by chance he did what he thought was good, evil was close at hand. Paul confessed that there was a war within himself. On one hand he delighted in the law of God, but that this delight in the law was at odds with his members. Paul’s hands and feet were not cooperating with what he willed them to do.*

*Getting to the heart of the matter as Paul did and as Luther did with Erasmus confessing that we are bound to sin rather than we have been given a free will completely changes the words that come from a preacher’s mouth. Paul didn’t preach to the Romans how to become better at keeping the commandments so they could be freer. Luther didn’t congratulate Erasmus for being correct that he had a free will but congratulated him that he found the source of his bondage...the notion that the power to do good came from the law. Gerhard Forde, a prolific writer and professor at Luther Seminary, clearly taught and wrote about what Jesus said concerning a “bound” will rather than a “free” will. Dr. Steve Paulson, the preacher we had for our 150th Nidaros celebration wrote the foreword for Gerhard’s book “Captivation of the Will” and noted the difference in preaching knowing that “wills” are not free but bound. Dr. Paulson writes, “What a vast difference it makes for a preacher to stand before a congregation and assume their wills are bound rather than to stand before a group and assume their wills are merely in need of motivation. The difference is as great as that between God’s work through the Holy Spirit and Satan.*

*So today, I am not delivering a motivational speech first congratulating you on your successes this week in keeping the commandments and then encouraging you to try harder this coming week so that your members will do as you “will” them to do. Paul never preached the solution to his problem of the bondage to sin could be broken with motivational speaking. Paul declared the answer to his bondage to sin was not going to be broken by making better choices. Instead, Paul cried out searching for the solution outside himself, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”*

*When you look through this scripture in Romans, “I” is always the subject of nearly all of these sentences. You never get a feeling that having “I” in the driver’s seat is a good thing. There is no freedom in believing you have a free will. Instead of motivating you to try harder, Paul delivers the gospel in the very last verse of this scripture. After Paul confesses that he cannot do what is right, Paul breaks the bondage to sin by giving thanks to Jesus Christ who forgave your sin once and for all on the cross.*

*Jesus ran into the same kind of people who believed they could choose right from wrong in the gospel from Matthew for today. Jesus compared the people of that day to children. Usually, when Jesus refers to children, he does so in a positive way. But not so in this case. Here, Jesus compares the people of that day to immature children. Children who you tell to do one thing, do the opposite. Jesus said, We played the flute for them, but they didn't dance. We wailed, but you didn't mourn. But Jesus doesn't motivate these children to dance or mourn. Instead, Jesus delivers them freedom by taking their heavy burdens from them and giving them rest.*

*Jesus is not telling you how to carry your burdens today. God has not given you a "free" will so that you can work your way to salvation. Instead God knows that you and I are like Paul and are in bondage to sin and we cannot free ourselves.*

*So, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Thanks be to Jesus Christ, who has forgiven you and gives you rest. Amen.*