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Selections from St. Augustine's *On The Spirit and the Letter* (A.D. 412)¹

Chapter 4.— Theirs is a Much More Serious Error, Requiring a Very Vigorous Refutation, Who Deny God's Grace to Be Necessary

They, however, must be resisted with the utmost ardor and vigor who suppose that without God's help, the mere power of the human will in itself, can either perfect righteousness, or advance steadily towards it; and when they begin to be hard pressed about their presumption in asserting that this result can be reached without the divine assistance, they check themselves, and do not venture to utter such an opinion, because they see how impious and insufferable it is. But they allege that such attainments are not made without God's help on this account, namely, because God both created man with the free choice of his will, and, by giving him commandments, teaches him, Himself, how man ought to live; and indeed assists him, in that He takes away his ignorance by instructing him in the knowledge of what he ought to avoid and to desire in his actions: and thus, by means of the free-will naturally implanted within him, he enters on the way which is pointed out to him, and by persevering in a just and pious course of life, deserves to attain to the blessedness of eternal life.

Chapter 5 [III.]— True Grace is the Gift of the Holy Ghost, Which Kindles in the Soul the Joy and Love of Goodness

We, however, on our side affirm that the human will is so divinely aided in the pursuit of righteousness, that (in addition to man's being created with a free-will, and in addition to the teaching by which he is instructed how he ought to live) he receives the Holy Ghost, by whom there is formed in his mind a delight in, and a love of, that supreme and unchangeable good which is God, even now while he is still walking by faith and not yet by sight;² **Corinthians 5:7** in order that by this gift to him of the earnest, as it were, of the free gift, he may conceive an ardent desire to cleave to his Maker, and may burn to enter upon the participation in that true light, that it may go well with him from Him to whom he owes his existence. A man's free-will, indeed, avails for nothing except to sin, if he knows not the way of truth; and even after his duty and his proper aim shall begin to become known to him, unless he also take delight in and feel a love for it, he neither does his duty, nor sets about it, nor lives rightly. Now, in order that such a course may engage our affections, God's love is shed abroad in our hearts, not through the free-will which arises from ourselves, but through the Holy Ghost, which is given to us. **Romans 5:5**

Chapter 7 [V.]— What is Proposed to Be Here Treated

We will, however, consider, if you please, the whole of this passage of the apostle and thoroughly handle it, as the Lord shall enable us. For I want, if possible, to prove that the apostle's words, The letter kills, but the spirit gives life, do not refer to figurative phrases—although even in this sense a suitable signification might be obtained from them—but rather plainly to the law, which forbids whatever is evil. When I shall have proved this, it will more manifestly appear that to lead a holy life is the gift of God—not only because God has given a free-will to man, without which there is no living ill or well; nor only because He has given him a commandment to teach him how he ought to live; but

¹ Adapted from *New Advent* <http://home.newadvent.org/fathers/1502.htm>

because through the Holy Ghost He sheds love abroad in the hearts **Romans 7:7** of those whom he foreknew, in order to predestinate them; whom He predestinated, that He might call them; whom He called, that he might justify them; and whom he justified, that He might glorify them. **Romans 8:29-30** When this point also shall be cleared, you will, I think, see how vain it is to say that those things only are unexampled possibilities, which are the works of God—such as the passage of the camel through the needle's eye, which we have already referred to, and other similar cases, which to us no doubt are impossible, but easy enough to God; and that man's righteousness is not to be counted in this class of things, on the ground of its being properly man's work, not God's; although there is no reason for supposing, without an example, that his perfection exists, even if it is possible. That these assertions are vain will be clear enough, after it has been also plainly shown that even man's righteousness must be attributed to the operation of God, although not taking place without man's will; and we therefore cannot deny that his perfection is possible even in this life, because all things are possible with God, **Mark 10:27** — both those which He accomplishes of His own sole will, and those which He appoints to be done with the cooperation with Himself of His creature's will. Accordingly, whatever of such things He does not effect is no doubt without an example in the way of accomplished facts, although with God it possesses both in His power the cause of its possibility, and in His wisdom the reason of its unreality. And should this cause be hidden from man, let him not forget that he is a man; nor charge God with folly simply because he cannot fully comprehend His wisdom.

Chapter 20.— The Law Without Grace

Now why need I speak of what follows? For why it was that by this their impiety those men— I mean those who could have known the Creator through the creature— fell (since God resists the proud **James 4:6**) and whither they plunged, is better shown in the sequel of this epistle than we can here mention. For in this letter of mine we have not undertaken to expound this epistle, but only mainly on its authority, to demonstrate, so far as we are able, that we are assisted by divine aid towards the achievement of righteousness—not merely because God has given us a law full of good and holy precepts, but because our very will without which we cannot do any good thing, is assisted and elevated by the importation of the Spirit of grace, without which help mere teaching is the letter that kills, **2 Corinthians 3:6** forasmuch as it rather holds them guilty of transgression, than justifies the ungodly. Now just as those who come to know the Creator through the creature received no benefit towards salvation, from their knowledge—because though they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, nor gave Him thanks, although professing themselves to be wise; **Romans 1:21** — so also they who know from the law how man ought to live, are not made righteous by their knowledge, because, going about to establish their own righteousness, they have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. **Romans 10:3**

Chapter 26.— No Fruit Good Except It Grow from the Root of Love

It is evident, then, that the oldness of the letter, in the absence of the newness of the spirit, instead of freeing us from sin, rather makes us guilty by the knowledge of sin. Whence it is written in another part of Scripture, He that increases knowledge, increases sorrow, **Ecclesiastes 1:18** — not that the law is itself evil, but because the commandment has its good in the demonstration of the letter, not in the assistance of the spirit; and if this commandment is kept from the fear of punishment and not from

the love of righteousness, it is servilely kept, not freely, and therefore it is not kept at all. For no fruit is good which does not grow from the root of love. If, however, that faith be present which works by love, [Galatians 5:6](#) then one begins to delight in the law of God after the inward man, [Romans 7:22](#) and this delight is the gift of the spirit, not of the letter; even though there is another law in our members still warring against the law of the mind, until the old state is changed, and passes into that newness which increases from day to day in the inward man, while the grace of God is liberating us from the body of this death through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Chapter 52 [XXX.]— Grace Establishes Free Will

Do we then by grace make void free will? God forbid! Nay, rather we establish free will. For even as the law by faith, so free will by grace, is not made void, but established. [Romans 3:31](#) For neither is the law fulfilled except by free will; but by the law is the knowledge of sin, by faith the acquisition of grace against sin, by grace the healing of the soul from the disease of sin, by the health of the soul freedom of will, by free will the love of righteousness, by love of righteousness the accomplishment of the law. Accordingly, as the law is not made void, but is established through faith, since faith procures grace whereby the law is fulfilled; so free will is not made void through grace, but is established, since grace cures the will whereby righteousness is freely loved. Now all the stages which I have here connected together in their successive links, have severally their proper voices in the sacred Scriptures. The law says: You shall not covet. [Exodus 20:17](#) Faith says: Heal my soul, for I have sinned against You. Grace says: Behold, you are made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you. [John 5:14](#) Health says: O Lord my God, I cried unto You, and You have healed me. Free will says: I will freely sacrifice unto You. Love of righteousness says: Transgressors told me pleasant tales, but not according to Your law, O Lord. How is it then that miserable men dare to be proud, either of their free will, before they are freed, or of their own strength, if they have been freed? They do not observe that in the very mention of free will they pronounce the name of liberty. But where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. [2 Corinthians 3:17](#) If, therefore, they are the slaves of sin, why do they boast of free will? For by what a man is overcome, to the same is he delivered as a slave. [2 Peter 2:19](#) But if they have been freed, why do they vaunt themselves as if it were by their own doing, and boast, as if they had not received? Or are they free in such sort that they do not choose to have Him for their Lord who says to them: Without me you can do nothing; [John 15:5](#) and If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed? [John 8:36](#)

Chapter 60 [XXXIV.]— The Will to Believe is from God

Let this discussion suffice, if it satisfactorily meets the question we had to solve. It may be, however, objected in reply, that we must take heed lest some one should suppose that the sin would have to be imputed to God which is committed by free will, if in the passage where it is asked, What do you have that you did not receive? [1 Corinthians 4:7](#) the very will by which we believe is reckoned as a gift of God, because it arises out of the free will which we received at our creation. Let the objector, however, attentively observe that this will is to be ascribed to the divine gift, not merely because it arises from our free will, which was created naturally with us; but also because God acts upon us by the incentives of our perceptions, to will and to believe, either externally by evangelical exhortations, where even the commands of the law also do something, if they so far admonish a man of his infirmity that he betakes himself to the grace that justifies by believing; or internally, where no man has in his own

control what shall enter into his thoughts, although it appertains to his own will to consent or to dissent. Since God, therefore, in such ways acts upon the reasonable soul in order that it may believe in Him (and certainly there is no ability whatever in free will to believe, unless there be persuasion or summons towards some one in whom to believe), it surely follows that it is God who both works in man the willing to believe, and in all things prevents us with His mercy. To yield our consent, indeed, to God's summons, or to withhold it, is (as I have said) the function of our own will. And this not only does not invalidate what is said, For what do you have that you did not receive? **1 Corinthians 4:7** but it really confirms it. For the soul cannot receive and possess these gifts, which are here referred to, except by yielding its consent. And thus whatever it possesses, and whatever it receives, is from God; and yet the act of receiving and having belongs, of course, to the receiver and possessor. Now, should any man be for constraining us to examine into this profound mystery, why this person is so persuaded as to yield, and that person is not, there are only two things occurring to me, which I should like to advance as my answer: O the depth of the riches! **Romans 11:33** and Is there unrighteousness with God? **Romans 9:14** If the man is displeased with such an answer, he must seek more learned disputants; but let him beware lest he find presumptuous ones.



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