Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 5.5 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

The Relationship between God's Activity and Human Responsibility

Everyone has a certain amount of freedom of choice with respect to earthly things, whether they are a believer or an unbeliever. In the Old Testament many of the sacrifices were mandated, but there were also some offerings that were free will offerings. For example, Leviticus 22:18-19 says: **"You shall offer of your own free will a male without blemish"** in connection with certain vows and human decisions. In matters of marriage, the apostle Paul wrote that the father had a choice as to whether he should allow his virgin daughter to marry or insist that she should remain unmarried: **"Let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well"** (1 Corinthians 7:36-37). A human being has power over his own will in many matters; We are not programmed so that we must act a certain way and have no choice in these matters.

God controls the whole world and everything in it. But at the same time, people have free will. We cannot understand how both things can be true. They seem to contradict each other. But both are true: God has control over all things, and man is free to choose to do one thing or another, to sin in a certain way, or to refrain from sinning in that way. There is one thing, however, that man cannot do by nature. He cannot choose to believe in Jesus. This means that a person cannot, of their own free will, do anything that pleases God, because **"without faith it is impossible to please Him"** (Hebrews 11:6). This is why it is absolutely necessary to be born again before one can please God by one's thoughts and actions. A person must have a spiritual birth from above. Faith in Jesus is a gift from God; it is never a choice of man.

Jesus teaches that true freedom means that we no longer are slaves of sin and Satan. It means that we can make decisions that are in line with God's will. The Holy Spirit gives us this freedom through the truth of the Gospel, for He works through the means of grace: The Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Jesus said: **"If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free"** (John 8:31-32). Jesus' Jewish listeners, however, thought they were already free. Jesus therefore said to them: **"Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin…If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed"** (John 8:34, 36). By nature, we were all **"slaves of sin"** (Romans 6:17). But through Christ and His Gospel we have **"been set free from sin"** and have **"become slaves of God"** and **"slaves of righteousness"** (Romans 6:18, 22).

Christians, however, have two opposing forces working within them: the new man and the old man — the mind (or spirit) and the flesh. The new man of faith has the freedom to trust in Christ for forgiveness and the freedom to serve God, but the new man is hindered by the flesh (the old man) which remains within him until death. Paul confessed this concerning himself: **"So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin"** (Romans 7:25).

How then should a Christian make decisions? Because we trust in Christ and want to please our loving Lord, we must eliminate all options that are sinful according to God's Word. This involves continual growth in understanding God's Word by reading and studying the Bible. We should also ask God for wisdom to make the best decision: **"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God"** (James 1:5). Since each one of us by faith in Christ has become a child of God, we will ask our Christian brothers and

sisters for their advice. And finally, we will make our decision, trying to determine which course of action will bring the greatest glory to God and the greatest good to others and to ourselves.

Unbelievers, on the other hand, cannot choose to believe in Jesus and therefore cannot choose to do anything except sin. That is why Jesus said: **"You must be born again"** (John 3:7). The kind of choice referred to in Deuteronomy 30:19 and Joshua 24:14-15 is possible only for those who already believe in Christ. **"The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God"** (1 Corinthians 2:14). Unbelievers can choose to do things that others consider good, but as we saw above, without faith these "good" works do not please God.

Even though unbelievers cannot choose not to sin, God still holds them responsible for their sin. The fact is they are not being forced to sin, but in reality, they enjoy sinning. The unbeliever **"approves of those who practice"** sins of all kinds (Romans 1:32). God uses commands, threats, and promises to control human beings and their sinful urges. Nevertheless, they sin of their own free will and God holds them accountable for these sins. The whole world and everyone in it stand **"guilty before God"** (Romans 3:19).

Questions

1. To what degree do believers and unbelievers have freedom of choice?
2. What choice can unbelievers not make? Why not?
3. Why does it not make sense to human reason that man should be held responsible for his sinning?
4. What is true freedom according to Jesus?
5. How does God give this freedom to human beings?
6. What two forces are found within the Christian?
7. List the things a Christian should do to make a difficult decision.
8. Show from Scripture that God holds each person responsible for his or her actions.