

# *The Heidelberg Disputation*

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## Compare Luther's explanations below with the document of his 28 theses.

**PROOFS OF THE THESES:** Debated in the Chapter at Heidelberg, May 1518, A.D.

1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.

This is made clear by the Apostle in his letter to the Romans (3:21): »But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.« St. Augustine interprets this in his book ›The Spirit and the Letter‹ (De Spiritu et Littera): »Without the law, that is, without its support.« In Rom. 5:20 the Apostle states, »Law intervened, to increase the trespass«, and in Rom. 7:9 he adds, »But when the commandment came, sin revived.« For this reason he calls the law »a law of death« and »a law of sin« in Rom. 8:2. Indeed, in 2 Cor. 3:6 he says, »the written code kills«, which St. Augustine throughout his book ›The Spirit and the Letter‹ understands as applying to every law, even the holiest law of God.

2. Much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end.

Since the law of God, which is holy and unstained, true, just, etc., is given man by God as an aid beyond his natural powers to enlighten him and move him to do the good, and nevertheless the opposite takes place, namely, that he becomes more wicked, how can he, left to his own power and without such aid, be induced to do good? If a person does not do good with help from without, he will do even less by his own strength. Therefore the Apostle, in Rom. 3:10-12, calls all persons corrupt and impotent who neither understand nor seek God, for all, he says, have gone astray.

3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.

Human works appear attractive outwardly, but within they are filthy, as Christ says concerning the Pharisees in Matt. 23:27. For they appear to the doer and others good and beautiful, yet God does not judge according to appearances but searches »the minds and hearts« (Ps. 7:9). For without grace and faith it is impossible to have a pure heart. Acts 15:9: »He cleansed their hearts by faith.«

The thesis is proven in the following way: If the works of righteous men are sins, as Thesis 7 of this disputation states, this is much more the case concerning the works of those who are not righteous. But the just speak in behalf of their works in the following way: »Do not enter into judgment with thy servant, Lord, for no man living is righteous before thee« (Ps. 143:2). The Apostle speaks likewise in Gal. 3:10, »All who rely on the works of the law are under the curse.« But the works of men are the works of the law, and the curse will not be placed upon venial sins. Therefore they are mortal sins. In the third place, Rom. 2:21 states, »You who teach others not to steal, do you steal?« St. Augustine interprets this to mean that men are thieves according to their guilty consciences even if they publicly judge or reprimand other thieves.

4. Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.

That the works of God are unattractive is clear from what is said in **Isa. 53:2**, »He had no form of comeliness«, and in **1 Sam. 2:6**, »The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.« This is understood to mean that the Lord humbles and frightens us by means of the law and the sight of our sins so that we seem in the eyes of men, as in our own, as nothing, foolish, and wicked, for we are in truth that. Insofar as we acknowledge and confess this, there is »no form or beauty« in us, but our life is hidden in God (i.e. in the bare confidence in his mercy), finding in ourselves nothing but sin, foolishness, death, and hell, according to that verse of the Apostle in **2 Cor. 6:9-10**, »As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as dying, and behold we live.« And that it is which **Isa. 28:21** calls the »alien work« of God »that he may do his work« (that is, he humbles us thoroughly, making us despair, so that he may exalt us in his mercy, giving us hope), just as **Hab. 3:2** states, »In wrath remember mercy.« Such a man therefore is displeased with all his works; he sees no beauty, but only his depravity. Indeed, he also does those things which appear foolish and disgusting to others.

This depravity, however, comes into being in us either when God punishes us or when we accuse ourselves, as **1 Cor. 11:31** says, »If we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged by the Lord.« **Deut. 32:36** also states, »The Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.« In this way, consequently, the unattractive works which God does in us, that is, those which are humble and devout, are really eternal, for humility and fear of God are our entire merit.

5. The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works which are apparently good), as though they were crimes.

For crimes are such acts which can also be condemned before men, such as adultery, theft, homicide, slander, etc. Mortal sins, on the other hand, are those which seem good yet are essentially fruits of a bad root and a bad tree. Augustine states this in the fourth book of ›Against Julian‹ (*Contra Julianum*).

6. The works of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless.

In **Eccles. 7:20**, we read, »Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.« In this connection, however, some people say that the righteous man indeed sins, but not when he does good. They may be refuted in the following manner: If that is what this verse wants to say, why waste so many words? Or does the Holy Spirit like to indulge in loquacious and foolish babble? For this meaning would then be adequately expressed by the following: »There is not a righteous man on earth who does not sin.« Why does he add »who does good,« as if another person were righteous who did evil? For no one except a righteous man does good. Where, however, he speaks of sins outside the realm of good works he speaks thus (**Prov. 24:16**), »The righteous man falls seven times a day.« Here he does not say: A righteous man falls seven times a day when he does good. This is a comparison: If someone cuts with a rusty and rough hatchet, even though the worker is a good craftsman, the hatchet leaves bad, jagged, and ugly gashes. So it is when God works through us.

7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.

This is clear from **Thesis 4**. To trust in works, which one ought to do in fear, is equivalent to giving oneself the honor and taking it from God, to whom fear is due in connection with every work. But this is completely wrong, namely to please oneself, to enjoy oneself in one's works, and to adore oneself as an idol. He who is self-confident and without fear of God, however, acts entirely in this manner. For if he had fear he would not be self-confident, and for this reason he would not be pleased with himself, but he would be pleased with God.

In the second place, it is clear from the words of the Psalmist (**Ps. 143:2**), »Enter not into judgment with thy servant«, and **Ps. 32:5**, »I said: I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.« etc. But that these are not venial sins is clear because these passages state that confession and repentance are not necessary for venial sins. If, therefore, they are mortal sins and »all the saints intercede for them«, as it is stated in the same place, then the works of the saints are mortal sins. But the works of the saints are good works, wherefore they are meritorious for them only through the fear of their humble confession.

In the third place, it is clear from the Lord's Prayer, »Forgive us our trespasses« (**Matt. 6:12**). This is a prayer of the saints, therefore those trespasses are good works for which they pray. But that these are mortal sins is clear from the following verse, »If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses« (**Matt. 6:15**). Note that these trespasses are such that, if unforgiven, they would condemn them, unless they pray this prayer sincerely and forgive others.

In the fourth place, it is clear from **Rev. 21:27**, »Nothing unclean shall enter into it« (the kingdom of heaven). But everything that hinders entrance into the kingdom of heaven is mortal sin (or it would be necessary to interpret the concept of »mortal sin« in another way). Venial sin, however, hinders because it makes the soul unclean and has no place in the kingdom of heaven. Consequently, etc.

8. By so much more are the works of man mortal sins when they are done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security.

The inevitable deduction from the preceding thesis is clear. For where there is no fear there is no humility. Where there is no humility there is pride, and where there is pride there are the wrath and judgment of God, »for God opposes the haughty. Indeed, if pride would cease there would be no sin anywhere.

9. To say that works without Christ are dead, but not mortal, appears to constitute a perilous surrender of the fear of God.

For in this way men become certain and therefore haughty, which is perilous. For in such a way God is constantly deprived of the glory which is due him and which is transferred to other things, since one should strive with all diligence to give him the glory-the sooner the better. For this reason the Bible advises us, »Do not delay being converted to the Lord.« For if that person offends him who withdraws glory from him, how much more does that person offend him who continues to withdraw glory from him and does this boldly! But whoever is not in Christ or who withdraws from him withdraws glory from him, as is well known.

10. Indeed, it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin.

This I prove in the following way: Scripture does not speak of dead things in such a manner, stating that something is not mortal which is nevertheless dead. Indeed, neither does grammar, which says that »dead« is a stronger term than »mortal«. For the grammarians call a mortal work one which kills, a »dead« work not one that has been killed, but one that is not alive. But God despises what is not alive, as is written in **Prov. 15:8**, »The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord.«

Second, the will must do something with respect to such a dead work, namely, either love or hate it. The will cannot hate a dead work since the will is evil. Consequently the will loves a dead work, and therefore it loves something dead. In that act itself it thus induces an evil work of the will against God whom it should love and honor in this and in every deed.

11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.

This is clear from **Thesis 4**. For it is impossible to trust in God unless one has despaired in all creatures and knows that nothing can profit one without God. Since there is no person who has this pure hope, as we said above, and since we still place some confidence in the creature, it is clear that we must, because of impurity in all things, fear the judgment of God. Thus arrogance must be avoided, not only in the work, but in the inclination also, that is, it must displease us still to have confidence in the creature.

12. In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal.

This becomes sufficiently clear from what has been said. For as much as we accuse ourselves, so much God pardons us, according to the verse, »Confess your misdeed so that you will be justified« (cf. **Isa. 43:26**), and according to another (**Ps. 141:4**), »Incline not my heart to any evil, to busy myself with wicked deeds«.

13. Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.

The first part is clear, for the will is captive and subject to sin. Not that it is nothing, but that it is not free except to do evil. According to **John 8:34,36**, »Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin.« »So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.« Hence St. Augustine says in his book ›The Spirit and the Letter‹: »Free will without grace has the power to do nothing but sin«; and in the second book of ›Against Julian‹, »You call the will free, but in fact it is an enslaved will,« and in many other places.

The second part is clear from what has been said above and from the verse in **Hos. 13:9**, »Israel, you are bringing misfortune upon yourself, for your salvation is alone with me,« and from similar passages.

14. Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity.

An illustration will make the meaning of this thesis clear. Just as a dead man can do something toward life only in his original capacity (*in vitam solum subiective*), so can he do something toward death in an active manner while he lives. Free will, however, is dead, as demonstrated by the dead whom the Lord has raised up, as the holy teachers of the church say. St. Augustine, moreover, proves this same thesis in his various writings against the Pelagians.

15. Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity (*subiectiva potentia*).

The Master of the Sentences (Peter Lombard), quoting Augustine, states, »By these testimonies it is obviously demonstrated that man received a righteous nature and a good will when he was created, and also the help by means of which he could prevail. Otherwise it would appear as though he had not fallen because of his own fault.« He speaks of the active capacity (*potentia activa*), which is obviously contrary to Augustine's opinion in his book ›Concerning Reprimand and Grace‹ (De Correptione et Gratia), where the latter puts it in this way: »He received the ability to act, if he so willed, but he did not have the will by means of which he could act.« By »ability to act« he understands the original capacity (*potentia subiectiva*), and by »will by means of which he could,« the active capacity (*potentia activa*).

The second part (of the thesis), however, is sufficiently clear from the same reference to the Master.

16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.

On the basis of what has been said, the following is clear: While a person is doing what is in him, he sins and seeks himself in everything. But if he should suppose that through sin he would become worthy of or prepared for grace, he would add haughty arrogance to his sin and not believe that sin is sin and evil is evil, which is an exceedingly great sin. As **Jer. 2:13** says, »For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water,« that is, through sin they are far from me and yet they presume to do good by their own ability.

Now you ask: What then shall we do? Shall we go our way with indifference because we can do nothing but sin? I would reply: By no means. But, having heard this, fall down and pray for grace and place your hope in Christ in whom is our salvation, life, and resurrection. For this reason we are so instructed—for this reason the law makes us aware of sin so that, having recognized our sin, we may seek and receive grace. Thus God »gives grace to the humble« (**1 Pet. 5:5**), and »whoever humbles himself will be exalted« (**Matt. 23:12**). The law humbles, grace exalts. The law effects fear and wrath, grace effects hope and mercy. Through the law comes knowledge of sin (**Rom. 3:20**), through knowledge of sin, however, comes humility, and through humility grace is acquired. Thus an action which is alien to God's nature (*opus alienum dei*) results in a deed belonging to his very nature (*opus proprium*): he makes a person a sinner so that he may make him righteous.

17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.

This is clear from what has been said, for, according to the gospel, the kingdom of heaven is given to children and the humble (**Mark 10:14,16**), and Christ loves them. They cannot be humble who do not recognize that they are damnable whose sin smells to high heaven. Sin is recognized only through the law. It is apparent that not despair, but rather hope, is preached when we are told that we are sinners. Such preaching concerning sin is a preparation for grace, or it is rather the recognition of sin and faith in such preaching. Yearning for grace wells up when recognition of sin has arisen. A sick person seeks the physician when he recognizes the seriousness of his illness. Therefore one does not give cause for despair or death by telling a sick person about the danger of his illness, but, in effect, one urges him to seek a medical cure. To say that we are nothing and constantly sin when we do the best we can does not mean that we cause people to despair (unless we are fools); rather, we make them concerned about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

The law wills that man despair of his own ability, for it »leads him into hell« and »makes him a poor man« and shows him that he is a sinner in all his works, as the Apostle does in **Rom. 2** and **3:9**, where he says, »I have already charged that all men are under the power of sin.« However, he who acts simply in accordance with his ability and believes that he is thereby doing something good does not seem worthless to himself, nor does he despair of his own strength. Indeed, he is so presumptuous that he strives for grace in reliance on his own strength.

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the »invisible« things of God as though they were clearly »perceptible in those things which have actually happened« (**Rom. 1:20**; cf. **1 Cor 1:21-25**).

This is apparent in the example of those who were »theologians« and still were called »fools« by the Apostle in **Rom. 1:22**. Furthermore, the invisible things of God are virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth. The recognition of all these things does not make one worthy or wise.

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. The Apostle in **1 Cor. 1:25** calls them the weakness and folly of God. Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn »wisdom concerning invisible things« by means of »wisdom concerning visible things«, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering (*absconditum in passionibus*). As the Apostle says in **1 Cor. 1:21**, »For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.« Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as **Isa. 45:15** says, »Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.«

So, also, in **John 14:8**, where Philip spoke according to the theology of glory: »Show us the Father.« Christ forthwith set aside his flighty thought about seeing God elsewhere and led him to himself, saying, »Philip, he who has seen me has seen the Father« (**John 14:9**). For this reason true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ, as it is also stated in **John 10** (**John 14:6**) »No one comes to the Father, but by me.« »I am the door« (**John 10:9**), and so forth.

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls »enemies of the cross of Christ« (**Phil. 3:18**), for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are dethroned and the »old Adam«, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his »good works« unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.

22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.

This has already been said. Because men do not know the cross and hate it, they necessarily love the opposite, namely, wisdom, glory, power, and so on. Therefore they become increasingly blinded and hardened by such love, for desire cannot be satisfied by the acquisition of those things which it desires. Just as the love of money grows in proportion to the increase of the money itself, so the dropsy of the soul becomes thirstier the more it drinks, as the poet says: »The more water they drink, the more they thirst for it.« The same thought is expressed in **Eccles. 1:8**: »The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.« This holds true of all desires.

Thus also the desire for knowledge is not satisfied by the acquisition of wisdom but is stimulated that much more. Likewise the desire for glory is not satisfied by the acquisition of glory, nor is the desire to rule satisfied by power and authority, nor is the desire for praise satisfied by praise, and so on, as Christ shows in **John 4:13**, where he says, »Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again.«

The remedy for curing desire does not lie in satisfying it, but in extinguishing it. In other words, he who wishes to become wise does not seek wisdom by progressing toward it but becomes a fool by retrogressing into seeking »folly«. Likewise he who wishes to have much power, honor, pleasure, satisfaction in all things must flee rather than seek power, honor, pleasure, and satisfaction in all things. This is the wisdom which is folly to the world.

23. The »law brings the wrath« of God (**Rom. 4:15**), kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.

Thus **Gal. 3:13** states, »Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law«; and: »For all who rely on works of the law are under the curse« (**Gal. 3:10**); and **Rom. 4:15**: »For the law brings

wrath«; and **Rom. 7:10**: »The very commandment which promised life proved to be the death of me«; **Rom. 2:12**: »All who have sinned without the law will also perish without law.« Therefore he who boasts that he is wise and learned in the law boasts in his confusion, his damnation, the wrath of God, in death. As **Rom. 2:23** puts it: »You who boast in the law.«

24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.

Indeed »the law is holy« (**Rom. 7:12**), »every gift of God good« (**1 Tim. 4:4**), and »everything that is created exceedingly good«, as in **Gen. 1:31**. But, as stated above, he who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God. He thus misuses and defiles the gifts of God.

He, however, who has emptied himself (cf. **Phil. 2:7**) through suffering no longer does works but knows that God works and does all things in him. For this reason, whether God does works or not, it is all the same to him. He neither boasts if he does good works, nor is he disturbed if God does not do good works through him. He knows that it is sufficient if he suffers and is brought low by the cross in order to be annihilated all the more. It is this that Christ says in **John 3:7**, »You must be born anew.« To be born anew, one must consequently first die and then be raised up with the Son of Man. To die, I say, means to feel death at hand.

25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.

For the righteousness of God is not acquired by means of acts frequently repeated, as Aristotle taught, but it is imparted by faith, for »He who through faith is righteous shall live« (**Rom. 1:17**), and »Man believes with his heart and so is justified« (**Rom. 10:10**). Therefore I wish to have the words »without work« understood in the following manner: Not that the righteous person does nothing, but that his works do not make him righteous, rather that his righteousness creates works. For grace and faith are infused without our works. After they have been imparted the works follow. Thus **Rom. 3:20** states, »No human being will be justified in His sight by works of the law,« and, »For we hold that man is justified by faith apart from works of law« (**Rom. 3:28**). In other words, works contribute nothing to justification.

Therefore man knows that works which he does by such faith are not his but God's. For this reason he does not seek to become justified or glorified through them, but seeks God. His justification by faith in Christ is sufficient to him. Christ is his wisdom, righteousness, etc., as **1 Cor 1:30** has it, that he himself may be Christ's vessel and instrument (*operatio seu instrumentum*).

26. The law says, »do this«, and it is never done. Grace says, »believe in this«, and everything is already done.

The first part is clear from what has been stated by the Apostle and his interpreter, St. Augustine, in many places. And it has been stated often enough above that the »law« »works wrath« and keeps all men under the curse. The second part is clear from the same sources, for faith justifies. And the law (says St. Augustine) commands what faith obtains. For through faith Christ is in us, indeed, one with us. Christ is just and has fulfilled all the commands of God, wherefore we also fulfill everything through him since he was made ours through faith.

27. Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work (*operans*) and our work an accomplished work (*operatum*), and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work.

Since Christ lives in us through faith so he arouses us to do good works through that living faith in his work, for the works which he does are the fulfilment of the commands of God given us through faith. If we look at them we are moved to imitate them. For this reason the Apostle says, »Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children« (Eph. 5:1). Thus deeds of mercy are aroused by the works through which he has saved us, as St. Gregory says: »Every act of Christ is instruction for us, indeed, a stimulant.« If his action is in us it lives through faith, for it is exceedingly attractive according to the verse, »Draw me after you, let us make haste« (Song of Sol. 1:4) toward the fragrance »of your anointing oils« (Song of Sol. 1:3), that is, »your works.«

28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

The second part is clear and is accepted by all philosophers and theologians, for the object of love is its cause, assuming, according to Aristotle, that all power of the soul is passive and material and active only in receiving something. Thus it is also demonstrated that Aristotle's philosophy is contrary to theology since in all things it seeks those things which are its own and receives rather than gives something good. The first part is clear because the love of God which lives in man loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are »attractive« because they are loved; they are not loved because they are »attractive«: For this reason the love of man avoids sinners and evil persons. Thus Christ says: »For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners« (Matt. 9:13). This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person. »It is more blessed to give than to receive« (Acts 20:35), says the Apostle. Hence Ps. 41:1 states, »Blessed is he who considers the poor,« for the intellect cannot by nature comprehend an object which does not exist, that is the poor and needy person, but only a thing which does exist, that is the true and good. Therefore it judges according to appearances, is a respecter of persons, and judges according to that which can be seen, etc.