

UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS

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According to Philip Melancthon and Georg Rörer, two of Martin Luther's closest associates, Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg University on the thirty-first day of October, in the Year of Our Lord Fifteen-hundred and Seventeen. This event marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, and every year on that date Protestants celebrate their heritage. A later printing of the Theses in Basel carried the title, "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences." Luther posted the Theses for debate, but he never imagined the controversy they would cause. Nearly two years later, Luther and Johann Eck, professor of theology at Ingolstadt University, engaged in debate in the city of Leipzig. In the debate, Eck charged Luther with being a disciple of Jan Hus, a Czech theologian whom the church had burned to death for his heresy. Hus himself had been a follower of John Wycliffe, who escaped condemnation in his own lifetime, but whom the church excommunicated after his death. Luther's reformation was not without precedent. Although Luther escaped execution, he did not escape excommunication, and to this very day the church of Rome regards him as excommunicated.

Luther, and other reformers, like John Calvin, challenged the church of Rome on a number of its teachings. Desiderius Erasmus was sympathetic to the cause of the Reformers, but also critical of it. Four years after Luther posted his Theses, Erasmus wrote a book on the freedom of the will, in which he argued that the wills of men are bound neither by God nor by sin, so that they make free choices, and are responsible for those choices. Luther replied to Erasmus with his own book, *On the Bondage of the Will*, in which he ridiculed Erasmus's book, and argued that, after the Fall of man into sin, the will of every man is enslaved to sin, and only a sovereign act of God can free them. Luther did offer Erasmus some praise. In the conclusion to *The Bondage of the Will*, he wrote:

In this, moreover, I give you great praise, and proclaim it—you alone in pre-eminent distinction from all others, have entered upon the thing itself; that is, the grand turning point of the cause; and, have not wearied me with those irrelevant points about popery, purgatory, indulgences, and other like baubles, rather than causes, with which all have hitherto tried to hunt me down,—though in vain! You, and you alone saw, what was the grand hinge upon which the whole turned, and therefore you attacked the vital part at once; for which, from my heart, I thank you. (*The Bondage of the Will*, section 168)

Luther believed that the bondage of the will was the primary point of contention between him and his adversaries in Rome, and the other points were only secondary. If a man's will is in bondage to sin, he cannot turn to God in repentance and faith.

The church of Jesus Christ has always taught that sinners need the grace of God in order to be converted. Saint Augustine proved that point. They have disagreed, however, on the degree to which sin affects the sinner's will, and just how much of God's grace a sinner needs. Moreover, in relation to the matter of the freedom of the will, the Latin church developed the doctrine of merit. In the thirteenth century after Christ, Thomas Aquinas wrote, "That is, a man can receive as a reward only what God has given him the power to work for by his own effort... A rational creature moves itself to its action by its free will, and its action is therefore meritorious." (*Summa Theologiae*, Part 1 of Part 2, Question 114, Article 1) In the fourteenth century, Robert Holcot, an English Dominican, wrote, "... we can say that our works are fully worthy of eternal life, not

because of any merit inherent in the acts themselves but because of grace, since our Lord has established that he who does good works in a state of grace shall receive eternal life.” (*Lectures on the Wisdom of Solomon*, Chapter 12, Lecture 145) The church of Rome taught that a sinner can by his good works merit God’s grace, and then, being in God’s grace, can perform good works that merit eternal life. Luther repudiated the idea of merit. In his commentary on Saint Paul’s epistle to the Galatians, he wrote:

These disputations therefore of the schoolmen touching the merit of congruence and worthiness, are nothing else but vain toys and dreams of idle brains. Yet hereupon is the whole Papacy grounded. For there is no religious person, but he hath this imagination: I am able by the observation of my holy order to deserve grace of congruence, and by the works which I do after that I have received this grace, I am able to heap up such treasure of merit, as shall not only be sufficient for me to obtain eternal life, but also to give or sell unto others. (comment on Galatians 2:16)

John Calvin was of the same mind. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he wrote:

I must first make these prefatory remarks concerning the term “merit”: whoever first applied it to men’s works over against God’s judgment provided very badly for sincere faith... How much offense this term contains is clear from the great damage it has done to the world. Surely, as it is a most prideful term, it can do nothing but obscure God’s favor and imbue men with a sense of pride. (3.15.2)

A passage of Scripture to which both Luther and Calvin appealed in their arguments is Jesus’s Parable of the Unprofitable Servant. Saint Luke records Jesus as saying:

But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do. (Luke 17:7-10)

Luther, in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, countered the theologians of merit by referring to this parable. He wrote:

All that they say is nothing but lies and deception, for there is not a word of it true; first, that any one can merit grace by any work of his own, much less if one is lying in mortal sin; and then, although a man were in grace by works (as they say), that these works, done in grace, should be so precious as to merit the kingdom of heaven. For there stands Christ and asserts the contrary with clear, plain words. Luke xvii. 10: “When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants.” (The Sermon on the Mount, (7:28, 29)

Calvin wrote similarly in his comments on the parable:

By the engagements of the Law, I readily acknowledge, God is bound to men, if they were to discharge fully all that is required from them; but still, as this is a voluntary obligation, it remains a fixed principle, that man can demand nothing from God, as if he had merited any thing. And thus the arrogance of the flesh falls to the ground; for, granting that any man fulfilled the Law, he cannot plead that he has any claims on God, having done no more than he was bound to do. When he says that we are unprofitable servants, his meaning is, that God receives from us nothing beyond what is justly due but only collects the lawful revenues of his dominion. (Comment on Luke 17:7-10)

The church of Rome taught that a man is saved by grace and merit; the Reformers taught that a man is saved by grace alone, and not also by merit.

Before Jesus told the Parable of the Unprofitable Servant, He spoke to His disciples of offense and forgiveness. He told them that men would sin against them, and incur God's judgment, so that it would be better for them to kill themselves. However, Jesus taught, if one Christian sins against another, then the one offended ought to rebuke the offender. If the offender repents, then the one offended is bound always to forgive him. As many times as a man repents of his sins, the one he sins against must forgive. To forgive a man one time might be difficult; to forgive twice, even more so. To be so forgiving requires great faith, so the disciples asked Jesus to give them faith greater than they had. Jesus assured them, however, that their faith was sufficient. One with even a little faith might uproot a tree and cast it into the sea. On an earlier occasion Jesus said that a little faith can move mountains.

Jesus then explained to His disciples, by way of the Parable, that God does not relate to men by merit. When in ancient times a man was a servant, his person and his labor were wholly owned by another, and he did as his master commanded him to do. He did not work for wages, or reward of any kind. He simply worked for his master. When the servant had finished his work in the field, and came into the house, his master did not tell him to sit and eat. He rather told him to put on clean clothes, and to prepare him dinner, and, when the master had finished eating, only then was the servant permitted to eat. When the servant had finished serving his master, the master did not thank him, as if the servant had shown his master kindness. The master did not owe his servant anything, not even thanks. The servant, in serving his master, did only what he ought to do, what was his duty. He owed service to his master, and his master owed him nothing in return. So is the relation between God and man, Jesus said. God made man, and made him for Himself. He made man for His own purposes and for His own glory. Man is God's creature, and he is morally bound to serve God, to do as God commands. When a man does obey God, he only does his duty, what he is morally bound to do, and he deserves no reward. A man owes God his service, and God owes him nothing in return, because when a man serves God, he is only doing what God created him to do, what he is obligated to do. Jesus said that a man, when he has done God's will, should consider himself an unprofitable servant, which is to say, he brings no profit to God beyond his obedience, and so he deserves no reward.

The Scriptures teach that a man is righteous before God by faith, and not by the merit of good works. When God made Adam, He placed him in the garden of Eden and told he was free to eat of every tree in the garden, including the tree of life. Only God, with threat of death, commanded him not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God had freely given Adam life. Adam did not have to earn life; he had but to believe God, and do as He asked. God reckoned Abraham righteous on account of his faith. (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6) God through Habakkuk the prophet said that the righteous shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4) Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that

sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.” (John 5:24)

A man is righteous before God by faith, and not by the merit of good works. Nevertheless, if any man does not obey God, then that man is not righteous before God. He is worthless, good for nothing. Jesus, in His Olivet Discourse, told the Parable of the Talents, a parable about the kingdom of heaven. In it, a man, before traveling abroad, gave one of his servants some money, he gave another servant less, and another less still. The one with the most traded and doubled his money. The one with less traded with his and doubled his money. The one with the least, however, buried his in the ground in order to hide it. When their lord returned, he settled accounts with them. To the two that doubled their money he said, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.” He gave to those servants greater responsibility, and invited them to feast with him. To the one that hid his master’s money, he said:

Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. (Matthew 25:26-28)

The master rebuked the servant for his sloth and his lack of industry, and he ordered that the money be taken from him and given to the one with the most. Jesus gave this explanation of the parable:

For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:29, 30)

The one that does not work is unprofitable; he is useless. He does not work with the grace God gave him. He does not improve his gifts. Because He believes that God is harsh and ungracious, He does not serve Him, does not work for Him, and so does not glorify Him. Such a man lacks faith, and so God has no use for him. Saint James wrote:

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. (James 2L:14-17)

God is not harsh and ungracious. He is gentle and gracious, and He is pleased with the good works of His children. Saint Paul wrote to the Hebrews, “Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (Hebrews 13:20, 21)

A man apart from Christ is dead in trespasses and sin, and can do no good. (Ephesians 2:1) He is a slave of sin. (Romans 6:20) Lacking faith, he cannot please God. (Hebrews 11:6) The gospel is good news, however. Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

God does not demand merit, but rather offers grace, which men receive through faith. By that grace God forgives men their sins, and by grace He enables them to obey Him, and all for His glory.

Let us never forget that apart from Christ we would be but miserable sinners. Let us never try to merit God's favor. Let us always rely on God's grace in Christ Jesus.

Now unto the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, be glory and dominion for ever and ever. *Amen.*