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MERCY: NOT MERIT

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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The most conspicuous feature of the teaching of the Bible is the goodness and the grace of God. Grace means undeserved favour and it is the wonderful truth of the Christian religion that God is gracious and favourable to us although we do not deserve it. This is the unique revelation of God's character given to us by God Himself in the Bible, that He is a gracious God, full of compassion, long suffering and of tender mercy. Non-Christian religions differ radically here from Christianity. Most of them aim to make their God gracious and propitious by sacrifice and gifts; but the Christian religion starts from God's graciousness. For Christians, the service they render God is by way of a thank offering for what they have already received.

God's graciousness may be seen throughout the Bible, for example right at the beginning in the story of the Garden of Eden. Here we read

that after man had flatly disobeyed God's will, and while he was still defiantly excusing himself and showing no signs of repentance, he was given by God the promise of a Saviour. That promise was fulfilled at Calvary when our Lord Jesus Christ died in our stead. As St. Paul put it, while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son. This is an index of the love of God, "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us".

We have an illustration in practical life of this grace and favour of God towards His enemies, in the conversion of St. Paul. Here was a man who, while actively engaged in a headlong career of persecution and blasphemy against Christ and His people, was saved by Christ in mercy. St. Paul had no merits, on the contrary he was the chief of sinners as he put it, yet Christ's mercy reached to him.

The mercy of God is the characteristic keynote of the

Christian religion. If you will reflect, you will see that God's mercy and our own merits are in fact mutually incompatible. If grace or favour is to any extent deserved, it is to that extent not mercy but justice. Mercy can only be extended to the undeserving. That is why the Bible in depicting God as a God of mercy insists that we have no merits in ourselves. The fact is that all of us are under God's just condemnation for our rebellion and sin. God's mercy shines out against the blackness of our situation. For it is the grace of God and the mercy of God which characterizes the religion of the Bible. In this respect true Christianity is in sharp contrast to the religion which our own human heart invents for itself, outside of the knowledge of God's revelation in Scripture.

In all human religions, merit and the earning of salvation play a key part. Thus we know of the pilgrimages of

Hinduism, of the austerity of the monasteries of Buddhism, of the sacrificial giving at heathen temples such as ancient Delphi. All these activities are undertaken in the hope of winning merit with the deity. It is an idea which springs up naturally in the human heart. The same characteristic pressure from our common human nature finds its way into the Christian lands to-day who are pinning their hopes of going to Heaven on the sort of life that they are living, that is on their own merits. Some of you who are listening may perhaps be doing so. But it is quite contrary to the teaching of the Bible. Unfortunately, in the Church of Rome this pressure from the human heart has found official endorsement. Thus, Canon 32 of the Council of Trent (Sermon 6) declares that "if anyone says that the good works which a Christian man performs by God's help do not truly merit eternal life, let him be anathema". In contrast, however, our Lord declared that when we have done

all, no thought of merit is to arise in our hearts, but rather we are to confess that we are unmeritorious and unprofitable servants.

The New Testament contains many promises of bountiful reward that awaits the Christian. For example St. Paul in 2 Timothy 4:8 speaks of the crown of righteousness which is laid up for all who live for Christ's coming, and St. Peter in I Peter 5:6 speaks of the exaltation which God will confer on all who trust in Him. However, these rewards of which the New Testament speaks are not based on our merits but are part of God's abundant generosity. He surrounds us with loving kindness and makes known to us His purposes of goodness in the future in order to strengthen us now. It is turning the matter quite round the wrong way to think of these promised future blessings as based on our merit when they are in reality examples of God's generosity, made known to us now to strengthen us in

facing the trials of the present.

Cardinal Bellarmine, an eminent and leading authority in the Roman Catholic Church, has written in his book De Justificatione Book 5, chapter 5, that "The work of Christ has deserved that we should obtain salvation by our own merits". He goes on "the Catholic Church teaches that our chief hope and confidence must be placed in God, yet some also in our own merits". This teaching is directly opposed to the Bible, which could not be more emphatic in its determination to exclude our own works from consideration when our salvation is in view. Thus St. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8 "It was grace that saved you with faith for its instrument. It did not come from yourselves, it was God's gift; not from any action of yours or there would have been room for pride". Again in 2 Timothy 1:9, "God saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but

according to His own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus". And in Titus 3:5 "The kindness of God our Saviour dawned on us, His great love for man. He saved us and it was not thanks to anything that we had done for our own justification. In accordance with His own merciful design He saved us".

This Gospel of Grace makes God's loving character of mercy shine out clearly, for God's free gift of salvation to those who don't in any way deserve it, is the clearest proof of the depth of the love of our God for us. On the other hand, one of the gravest consequences of placing our merits alongside those of Christ as a ground of our salvation, as the Council of Trent and Cardinal Bellarmine so clearly did, is that in practice, our attention is directed away from Christ our Saviour, to ourselves and to our own efforts; so Christ's glory is effectively obscured. There can be no greater sin

for a Christian than to be guilty of obscuring the glory of Christ. Yet this is what happens if the natural promptings of the human heart are given way to, so that we put our own merits alongside of Christ's merits as the ground of our salvation. A good illustration of this effect may be taken from the Roman Catholic Prayer Book or Missal. At the beginning of the mass the priest prays (Missal 30 p.443) "We beseech thee O Lord by the merits of thy saints (he kisses the altar in the middle) whose relics are here and of all the saints that thou wouldest vouchsafe to forgive me all my sins, Amen". Note how the prayer asks for forgiveness, not on the ground of Christ's death, but on the ground of human merit.

Another example from the Missal is in the Collect for St. Nicholas' Day, December 6. This prayer runs in the official translation as follows: "O God Who hast adorned the blessed Bishop Nicholas with numerous

miracles, grant we beseech Thee that by His merits and prayers we may be saved from the fires of hell. Through our Lord". Let me repeat again the central words of the prayer, "We beseech Thee, O God, that by St. Nicholas' merits and prayers we may be saved from the fires of hell". Notice how in this prayer the whole attention of the worshipper is directed to the merits of St. Nicholas as the ground for salvation from hell. The death of Christ on Calvary which is the only ground that the Bible knows of for salvation from hell, is completely obscured from the attention of the worshipper - Christ's glory is extinguished. How different is the song of the redeemed in Heaven as recorded in Revelation 1:5 where they sing "Unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins by His blood, to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever". Note again the theme of the heavenly singers, Christ is the centre of their song. "To Him that

loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, to Him be the glory for ever and ever". There is no other way of salvation except by being washed from our sins through the death of Christ, by taking Him as our Lord and Saviour. Christ's salvation does not need to be added to. To do so is unacceptable to God.

In Heaven's eternity, not our merits, nor the saints' merits, but Christ's merits alone, will be magnified. There all creature pretensions will be renounced and the glory ascribed to God alone. "To Him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, to Him be the glory". May we sing that now by accepting Him as our Saviour; in order that we may sing it eternally!

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