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Grace: A Most Precious and Loving Gift from God

*Man: To Merit or Not to Merit,
That is the Question.*

1.) Christ by his body and blood made atonement for our sins. And merited, the graces necessary for justification, redemption, and eternal communion with God. Is there a role for man to play? Does merit and justification require anything from us? The answer to those questions can have positive or negative consequences.

2.) For the sake of context, consider the two extremes. On the one hand, there is the teaching that is essentially ***“by works alone.”*** According to this teaching, the effects of original sin are downplayed as bad habits. Man, by the value of his good works, can gain justification. God’s role is essentially to express His amazement at our deeds and to confirm His approval. Self-justification based solely on works arises from pride and an exaggerated sense of goodness, emphasizing human actions.

3.) On the other hand, is the teaching of ***“total depravity.”*** Where *works alone* puts man front and center, *total depravity* all but removes man from the picture. According to this view, humanity was stripped of any and all goodness. God would simply whitewash over our depraved nature. Like *“whited sepulchers”*¹ we are saved, but remain internally completely corrupted. Man has no free will or freedom to choose good or evil. Since humanity is naturally sinful, our actions become irrelevant and dependent on ***“faith alone.”***

*“In Him, with Him and Through”*²

4.) Can or does man merit anything by good works? ***Yes, but only*** if our works are in cooperation with God’s will and grace. We must remember that we were created in God's image, that *God always speaks or acts first*, and that mankind must cooperate with Him.

¹ Matthew 23:27

² Eucharistic Prayer, Roman Missal, Liturgy of the Eucharist

“Made in the image and likeness of God”³

5.) Created in God’s image and likeness, we can freely enter into relationships and choose to give of ourselves. We were created with a mind, will, and intellect capable of knowledge and reasoning. Similar to Christ, we have a human body and a spiritual soul. All that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have ever done was chosen freely. God has no inner conflict; his mind and heart are crystal clear, and his will is certain. Freedom of heart, mind, and soul is what makes us human, in the image of God. Turn again to Jesus Christ, true man and true God. Jesus' humanity is the model of our original justice. His humanity was fully and freely cooperative with his divinity. Our Lord’s divinity did not rule his humanity like a dictator. Neither was his humanity simply a passive existence.

God always speaks and acts first.

6.) In Scripture, from creation to the final coming of Our Lord, you will notice a pattern. Creation was made because God called it into being. Noah built the Ark, and Abraham believed after God spoke to them. The Prophets, blessed, preached and warned, after God sent them. Mary said yes, after the Angel spoke. Joseph took the Holy Family to Bethlehem and Egypt after God spoke to him. Jesus saved and redeemed because God loved and sent Him. In the Parable of the Prodigal Child⁴, we see the younger son coming to his senses while he's starving. While the son made a free choice to return home, it was the invisible hand of God's grace that moved his heart and mind. By the time we see our actions or the change of heart, God’s grace has already been at work. Conversion and good works are the fruits of grace.⁵

*“He cannot live fully according to the truth, **unless he acknowledges and entrusts himself to his creator.**”⁶*

7.) Sanctifying grace or deifying grace is given through the merits of Christ. And is therefore our primary source of merit and holiness. As mentioned above, man must acknowledge his creator and cooperate with God's divine gifts. Our merit is purely **secondary**. What does that mean? The value of our prayers and works depends solely on our cooperation with the grace and goodness of God.

³ CCC #355; Gen 1:27

⁴ Luke 5:11-32

⁵ CCC #1989; Matthew 4:17

⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, On the Church in the Modern World, Second Vatican Council

8.) God's works are as pure and holy as He is, so all He does is naturally just. Man's works are tainted by ignorance, unruly passions, and sin. As Scripture reminds us, *"the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."*⁷ Man can recognize the movement of grace and the Holy Spirit and respond to it. When our prayers, thoughts, and actions mirror God's goodness, then we *merit* credit for doing what is just in the eyes of God. Cooperating with God's will and grace means that *"our works"* are in reality *"His works."*

9.) God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit want to renew the whole man, heart, mind, body, and soul. God's grace is at work in us, assisting our will to assent to him and cooperate with His providential design. God not only gives us the grace of supernatural life (holiness of life), but he also gives us the grace to bring it to completion. To quote St Augustine, *"when God crowns man's works, He crowns His own."*

Conclusion

10.) The Lord needs your cooperation with the divine design of His grace. By cooperating and giving our consent, He will complete the work of redemption that began in you at Baptism. You and I were made for an inexhaustible amount of holiness and communion with God. The merits of Jesus Christ have opened an eternal source and treasury of graces for our sanctification. That treasury of graces is there for us to use in every moment of our lives unto death. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect model of what this cooperation looks like. God, by his grace, always acts first and brings us to perfection. Credit, or merit, is NOT in gaining justification; our credit comes from working with grace and letting God do His work in us.

Love the Lord Jesus, let him love you; now go in peace.

Timothy Andries
Catechist
St Joseph and Rose of Lima Parishes

⁷ Matthew 23:40-43