

Luther: Grace & Works

In his "Concerning Christian Liberty" Luther makes the bold statement: "A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." In regards to salvation, we are saved not by works but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But...we will not be perfect until the final resurrection, so we are called to do the works that keep our "mortal bodies" in check so that our "spiritual bodies" may be free to serve God.

And now let us turn to the other part: to the outward man. Here we shall give an answer to all those who, taking offence at the word of faith and at what I have asserted, say, "If faith does everything, and by itself suffices for justification, why then are good works commanded? Are we then to take our ease and do no works, content with faith?" Not so, impious men, I reply; not so. That would indeed really be the case, if we were thoroughly and completely inner and spiritual persons; but that will not happen until the last day, when the dead shall be raised. As long as we live in the flesh, we are but beginning and making advances in that which shall be completed in a future life. On this account the Apostle calls that which we have in this life the first fruits of the Spirit (Romans 8:23). In the future we shall have the tenths, and the fullness of the Spirit. To this part belongs the fact I have stated before: that the Christian is the servant of all and subject to all. For in that part in which he is free he does no works, but in that in which he is a servant he does all works. Let us see on what principle this is so.

Although, as I have said, inwardly, and according to the spirit, a man is amply enough justified by faith, having all that he requires to have, except that this very faith and abundance ought to increase from day to day, even till the future life, still he remains in this mortal life upon earth, in which it is necessary that he should rule his own body and have intercourse with men. Here then works begin; here he must not take his ease; here he must give heed to exercise his body by fastings, watchings, labour, and other regular discipline, so that it may be subdued to the spirit, and obey and conform itself to the inner man and faith, and not rebel against them nor hinder them, as is its nature to do if it is not kept under. For the inner man, being conformed to God and created after the image of God through faith, rejoices and delights itself in Christ, in whom such blessings have been conferred on it, and hence has only this task before it: to serve God with joy and for nought in free love.*

In his own life, Luther continued the spiritual disciplines he learned as a monk. Once he understood that salvation was a gift, he was free to do the "works" that helped him grow in his faith. No longer were these disciplines seen as a futile exercise of trying to please an angry, vengeful God. But now their practice became a natural response to God's grace and love. This distinction between "works for..." and "works because of..." is critical to our understanding of God's grace in our lives. We are not trying to save our selves, but we practice the disciplines to strengthen our relationship with the living Christ.

* "Concerning Christian Liberty" by Martin Luther. The Five-Foot Shelf of Books, "The Harvard Classics", Volume 36 (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910) pg. 353