

“Unprofitable Servants”

A very important lesson is conveyed by our Lord's illustration in Luke 17:5-10. It is not among Catholics alone that it is considered possible to perform works of supererogation¹. There are very many, who, by their actions at least, hold that they can place God under obligations to them. Love of approbation [praise], and the overvaluing of one's own deeds, are so universal that there are very few who do not at times have some traces of that disposition. **With some the idea obtains that God keeps a debit and credit account, charging each individual with his evil deeds, and giving him credit for all his good deeds, and that if the good over-balance the evil, then God owes him a reward. With this idea, more or less clearly defined, most worldling's flatter themselves that their case will be all right at the last.**

Many professors often imagine God is under some obligation to them and they manifest it in various ways. If they have given somewhat liberally to the cause of God, and have not been prospered as they think they should be, they withhold their gifts. They do not propose to work for the Lord unless they can receive at once large returns on the investment. Others find it difficult, when times are hard, to make as good a living for their families as they desire, and so they say, "We cannot afford to keep the Sabbath." As much as to say, "If God does not furnish me with everything I want he need not expect my services." Still others look for their reward in appreciation of their work by their brethren. If their efforts are not estimated at their true value, they become discouraged, and refuse to work when they are not appreciated. The disciples probably had some ideas of this kind in their minds when they said, "Increase our faith." **They doubtless desired an increase of faith that they might rise in the estimation of their fellow-men, on account of the miracles which it would enable them to perform.**

Now against all feeling of this kind, our Lord utters a rebuke. Summing up the case, he says: "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do' "" (Luke 17:10). **The truth is that the obligation is all on the side of man.** The fact that God created us and preserves us alive, places man under obligation to give his whole service to God. Jeremiah says, "Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed" (Lam. 3:22). Every moment of man's life places him under greater obligation to God than he can ever hope to fulfill. And as this mercy is extended to all, it is not alone the professed Christian who owes service to God. Sinners are under as much

¹ Supererogation: The performance of more work than duty requires.

obligation to God as though they had made a profession to serve him. But if we repent and obey the commandments of God in every particular, how does the case stand then? We are still unprofitable servants. God is none the richer for our service. There is a vast amount of sin that we have committed in the past, and as we can do no more than our duty from day to day, we are still largely in debt. Were it not that Christ has been set forth "for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God," the best of men would fail to obtain Heaven.

And so after all that has been done, eternal life must be "the gift of God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord." A proper appreciation of this would serve to keep us humble, and prevent many mistakes made on account of our self-sufficiency. Let us be careful lest we become lifted up because of the faith that we have, and so lose the grace of God, which is promised to the humble. **The more real faith we have in Christ, the more will we acknowledge our entire dependence on him, and our own utter weakness. Let us heed these words of the apostle: "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3).**

The Signs of the Times 8, 16 (April 20, 1882)