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THE WORK OF GOD.

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“Then said they unto Him, What shall we do that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.”—JOHN vi. 28, 29.

THERE was nothing peculiar in the circumstances under which this question was originally asked and answered; that is, nothing so peculiar as to make it less appropriate in a multitude of other cases. It is one which may be asked at any time and in any place. It is one which is asked, more or less distinctly, more or less earnestly, in every country and in every age. Some ask it listlessly, as if they cared not for an answer. Some ask it with an agonizing eagerness of importunity, as if their life depended on the answer. And between these there are many intermediate gradations. But whether whispered or shouted, shrieked or muttered, whether clothed in language or expressed in act, this question is still asked by men of all conditions and all characters: “What shall we do that we may work the works of God,” *i. e.*, the works which He requires and will accept, as means of reconciliation or as titles to his favour?

There is much implied or presupposed in this momentous question. It assumes the being of a God and one God, and of certain attributes essential to His nature. However false the notions entertained as to some of these, whoever really believes in the existence of a God, must believe that he is just as well as merciful, holy and true as well as almighty and all-wise. The question also takes for granted God's supremacy and sovereign propriety in all his creatures, and their dependence upon him for happiness, as well in this life as in that which is to come. It may also be said, tacitly, to take for granted the existence of some alienation between God and man, and the necessity of something to conciliate the parties. The very asking of the question implies ignorance of what will please God ; and this ignorance implies a state of alienation from Him. For a creature in actual communion with his Maker must know what is due to him and required by him. We cannot conceive of unfallen angels asking, in the sense in which the Jews asked, "What shall we do that we may work the works of God?"

As to all these points, the views of men indefinitely vary in clearness and correctness. And from this variety arises a corresponding difference in the sincerity and earnestness of the inquiry. But, excepting those who are in the lowest stage of ignorance or insensibility, it may be said without extravagance, that all men, everywhere, desire to know, and show by their actions or their words that they desire to know, what

they must do to work the works of God, to gain His favour, to avert His wrath. Why do the worst of men abstain from some forms of iniquity? In obedience to the voice of conscience? Why this voice is but a feeble echo of the voice of God, often so faint, or so confused, as to bear a very slight resemblance to the original authoritative utterance. But where it speaks at all, it speaks of a law and a lawgiver, of a judgment, and of future retribution. And the wicked man, who is deterred by conscience from some sins though not from others, goes just so far in endeavouring to work the works of God, or at least in asking, "What shall I do that I may work the works of God?"

But there are other ways in which the stress of this necessity is much more visibly betrayed than in the mere degrees of restraint or indulgence on the part of sinful men. They not only ask, in word or deed, what they must do to work the works of God, but they actually undertake to work them, according to their various ideas as to what they are, and how they must be wrought. A rapid glance at some of these attempts will throw light on the question of the text, and, at the same time, prepare us for the answer. One man imagines that the works of God are works to be performed by the members of the body, the hands, the knees, the lips; a prayer, a genuflexion, an oblation, in and of themselves, by some intrinsic efficacy of their own, or magical effect wrought by them, he supposes will secure the divine favour and his own salvation. This error certainly prevails most ex-

tensively among the heathen. But it also exists among Mohammedans and Jews, and under the corrupted forms of Christianity, and even in connexion with its purest forms, where outward services, no matter what, are once confounded with the essence of religion. And where the error thus exists, it is of course far more culpable and far more ruinous, than where it nestles in the dark, or gropes its way in twilight. But wherever found, it always tends to one of two results. The man who cherishes it is either blinded to his own destruction, and goes down to death with a lie in his right hand, or he is forced by experience to own, that he has not found what he sought, and to turn away from the externals which have proved so unsatisfying, still saying, as he said at first, but with a sense of want, made more intense by tantalizing disappointment: "What shall I do, that I may work the works of God?"

The next stage which he reaches, and which others more enlightened reach at once, without passing through this preparatory discipline, is that of substituting moral for ceremonial acts. The sinner undertakes to work the works of God by acts of virtue, doing right and doing good, and more especially by practising such acts of virtue as are likely to secure the sympathy of men, and thus confirm his favourable estimate of his own performances, which might otherwise be marred by an unquiet conscience. Hence the constant disposition to make social charities, not only almsgiving, but every other exercise of mutual benevolence,

the supreme if not the sole test of character. Hence the frequency with which we hear of men, who are notoriously guilty of great sins, but who are nevertheless rated, by themselves and others, as a kind of irreligious saints, on account of what is called their goodness of heart, a quality not always incompatible with gross injustice and habitual neglect of the most urgent duties, even towards their neighbours, as well as with a total want of love to God and of obedience to His will. In this delusion thousands live and die. But others are still goaded on by conscience to a fresh discovery that even this is not enough. The applauses of the world cannot prevent their seeing that however good their works may be in one sense, they are wholly insufficient in another; and they therefore come once more with the unsatisfied inquiry on their lips, or in their hearts, and in their looks: "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" We have tried to do right and to do good to our neighbours. But we find that even these good works are still imperfect, and that other duties have been utterly neglected, and that sins have been committed, and that all these arrears have been accumulating with a terrible rapidity, so that the good we have attempted shrinks to nothing in comparison with that which we have left undone, and with the positive evil which we have committed. With all this staring us in the face, and stopping up our path, in which direction shall we turn? With this sense of deficiency, even in our best deeds, and this consciousness of positive

transgression, "what shall we do that we may work the works of God?"

The man has now been brought, by a way that he knew not, to the doctrine of atonement, the necessity of expiation, something to satisfy God's justice and to heal the breach of his broken law. With this predominant impression, he may readily infer, that the works of God are works of compensation. He must make good his past failures, and make up for past offences, and by so doing work the works of God at last. But where shall he begin? Perhaps with negative attempts at reformation, by refraining from sins hitherto indulged. The unexpected difficulty here encountered drives him from reformation to repentance. He will weep with unfeigned sorrow over his offences. He will break his own heart with contrition, and move the heart of God with pity, by his penitential grief. But the same imperfection which had marred his reformation still adheres to his repentance. If sin could only be excluded for a moment, he might do it. But the sin that he has reason to repent of is not merely in his life, but in his heart, his very nature, Its action cannot be suspended any more than his existence, by an act of his own will. It will intrude into the pangs of his repentance and pervert them. He can no more break his heart than he can change his life. The one still remains hard, and the other still corrupt. His repentance needs itself to be reformed; his reformation needs itself to be repented of. So far from satisfying God's offended justice for past sins, they are themselves

provocative of that very justice; and the sinner abandoning this effort too, asks, almost in despair: What shall I do, that I may work the works of God.

What has just been described may be regarded as the highest ground that man ever reaches by a light of his own kindling. If he goes beyond this, under the same guidance, he must needs go down. And some accordingly descend from the sincere but vain attempt at reformation and repentance in their own strength, to the lower ground of meritorious abstinence and self-mortification, from repentance to penance, from the humbling of the soul to the humbling of the body, from inward grief to sackcloth and ashes, from vain attempts to abstain from what is evil, to real abstinence from what is not. Because they have not been able to appease God by renouncing sinful pleasures, they will now try to do it by renouncing innocent enjoyments. Because they have tried in vain to do what he commanded, they will now retrieve the failure by doing what is not commanded at all. Here is the secret of that complicated system of will-worship and voluntary humility, which is continually slaying its thousands and its tens of thousands, while a few are driven by it to repeat the question, still unanswered in their own experience: What shall we do that we may work the works of God?

Another descent, quite as great, though in a different direction, leads to a kind of desperate transfer of responsibility. As the sinner cannot work the works of God himself, the church or

the priest shall do it for him. He remains quiescent, and endeavours to be satisfied with his religious privileges or his ecclesiastical connexions. He persuades himself that he is like the cripple at Bethesda, waiting for the troubling of the waters. He cannot do the angel's work; it is enough if he is there to profit by it. This indolent reliance upon some one else to do what the man himself has tried in vain, is far more common, even in the purest churches, than we may imagine. It is in fact a kind of misplaced faith. The self-renunciation and reliance on another, which it involves, would be effectual if exercised upon the proper object. But when men cease their self-righteous efforts, only to trust in their connexions and advantages, only to think that they are safe because they are within the church and in possession of the gospel, the error is so monstrous and yet so insidious, that nothing but the sovereign grace of God could rouse some, as it does continually, even from this stagnant, nay this petrified condition, to inquire with more solicitude than ever, What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?

There is no need of insisting, or attempting to demonstrate, that these various degrees and forms of error always follow one another in the actual experience of a single person. The connexion pointed out between them may be rather theoretical than practical. It is not, however, for that reason the less real, being founded on the principles of human nature, and the mutual relations both of truth and error. Sometimes, moreover,

the transitions are realized in actual experience. To one man more, to another less, of what has now been described must be confirmed by memory as a part of his own spiritual history. In one or another, or in several, or in all, of the ways enumerated, some of you, my hearers, may have been induced to ask with growing earnestness and importunity: What shall we do that we may work the works of God?

Come then with me to the only oracle, from which a satisfactory response can be expected. Come to Him, to whom the Jews put the same question of old, and receive from Him the same reply. "Then said they unto him: what shall we do that we might work the works of God. Jesus answered and said unto them: this is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." The whole point of this answer lies in the contrast between working and believing. Their minds were full of work. They wanted something to work out for their own salvation. They would probably not have been surprised or startled had he enjoined upon them any task, however difficult, provided that by doing it they might have claimed to work the works of God. To a truly self-righteous spirit, difficulty, danger, pain, are all inducements rather than dissuasives. They enhance the merit and the honour of success, and therefore stimulate the pride of the performer. This has often been exemplified in the extraordinary abstinences, toils, and self-inflicted torments, both of Christian and heathen devotees. And the

same cause might doubtless have produced the same effects upon some of our Lord's contemporaries. Had he required them to scale the heavens or to sound the seas, they might have vainly undertaken it. Had he told them to lacerate their flesh, or to give the fruit of their body for the sin of their souls, they might have obeyed without a murmur, But a requisition to believe, and to believe on him, was something altogether different. The belief required comprehended a belief of his divine legation and authority as well as a belief of his ability and willingness to save. But it likewise comprehended, as inseparable from these, a simple trust in him for personal salvation, and a free and full consent to be saved by him. The complexity sometimes charged upon the Christian doctrine of faith is not greater than exists in any analogous or corresponding case. Tell the drowning man to be of good cheer for you will save him, and you call upon him to perform as many acts as are included in the exercise of saving faith. For in the first place, you invite him to believe the truth of your assertions. In the next place, you invite him to confide in your ability and willingness to save him. In the last place, you invite him to consent to your proposal by renouncing every other hope and agreeing to be saved by you. There is nothing more abstruse or difficult in saving faith. The difference is not in the essential nature of the mental acts and exercises, but in the circumstances under which they are performed.

It was this very simple and implicit trust, how-

ever, that created all the difficulty in the minds of some of Christ's immediate hearers. They had emphatically asked for work, for something to be wrought out by themselves, and in reply he told them to believe, to trust; and that not as something over and above the works which they demanded, but instead of them. He does not say, before or besides the works of God which you demanded, you must believe on me. He says, "This is itself the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent."

The same feeling of surprise and sense of incongruity may be excited now by this reply to the demand in question. In answer to a call for work, no matter how hard, nay the harder the better, to say, trust, believe, may look at first like an evasion or a mockery. And men may even now be slow to understand, and still more slow to credit, this extraordinary substitute for meritorious and laborious work, as a serious proposition, and indeed the only revealed method of salvation. It seems to cast unmerited contempt upon the efforts men have made, or are willing now to make, in their own strength, and as it were, at their own cost and risk. Is all this expenditure of time and labour to be slighted and contemptuously thrown away? Are all these tears and groans and fasts and vigils, all this blood and all this treasure, all this doing and abstaining, all this action and this suffering, to go for nothing? After spending a whole lifetime in thus working out my own salvation for myself, must I be told at last that I have only to believe?

This state of mind may be compared to that of men who have been shut up for years in a dark dungeon, and by incredible exertion, slow and secret toils, have pierced, as they supposed, the massive walls of their prison. The assiduity and constancy, with which such labours may be plied through a long course of years, have often been exemplified in real life. The eagerness with which the opportunity is watched, the ingenious devices to elude suspicion, and the still more ingenious substitutes for ordinary means and instruments, the unwearied patience with which the work has been resumed and even recommenced when interrupted, and the feverish anxiety with which the moment of complete success is supposed to be approaching; all these are familiar facts in the biography of more than one famous captive, as recorded by themselves. But suppose that at one of these critical conjunctures, when the almost superhuman toil of many years seems about to be rewarded by success, a stranger suddenly appears among the disconcerted labourers and commands them to desist and trust in him alone for freedom. It is easy to imagine the suspicion with which such a call would be received, and the demand for evidence, like that made by the Jews on hearing the unexpected words of the text. "They said therefore unto him: What sign showest thou then, that we may see and believe thee? what dost thou work?" And even after their misgiving, in the case which I have been supposing, was allayed by a sufficient attestation, it is easy to imagine that the startled prisoners

might look with some regret upon their implements of labour, and the patient toil of many years, now superseded and made useless. For a moment, we may even go so far as to conceive of some as balancing between the unexpected offer of immediate liberation, and the toilsome method of obtaining it to which they have become accustomed by long habit. But beyond this momentary hesitation, it is inconceivable that any one should go in his rejection of the offered freedom, unless stupefied and maddened by captivity. When the moment of decision comes, we may expect to see them all, without fail and without regret, turning their back upon the toils of many years, and joyfully following their new deliverer to the fresh air and the sunshine of the world without.

In like manner, they who have long been subjected to the bondage of corruption, and have toiled in vain to set themselves at liberty, when first made to hear and understand the declaration, that the saving work which God requires of them is to trust in Jesus Christ whom He has sent, may feel unwilling to abandon their long-cherished plans and methods of self-righteousness. But this reluctance soon subsides, and they address themselves to the consideration of the question, what is meant by calling faith in Christ the work of God, which men must do in order to appease His wrath and conciliate his favour? At first, perhaps, they may imagine, as indeed some have expressly taught, that the act of thus believing is accepted as a meritorious act in lieu of

all the rest, so that he who performs this work is considered as performing all the other "works of God." In this sense some have understood our Saviour's saying: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent." That is to say, this act is so acceptable to God, that for the sake of it he will relinquish all his other claims, and reckon you as innocent or righteous. But how can this be reconciled with truth and God's inexorable justice? How can any one act of a sinner, all whose other acts are sinful, be not only free from sin but so peculiarly acceptable to God as to supply the place of perfect and perpetual obedience? If it be said, that faith has no such merit in itself, but God is pleased, in sovereign condescension, so to estimate it and reward it; then the question arises, why even this should be required. For if God can by a sovereign act forgive all men's offences, for the sake of this one deed, he might forgive them without any such condition, and the death of Christ becomes a cruel superfluity. The faith which he describes as the saving "work of God," is faith in Himself as a Saviour and a sacrifice. The meritorious ground of acceptance, therefore, cannot be the act of believing, but must be something in the thing believed. Unless the death of Christ be utterly unmeaning and inefficacious, it is inconceivable that the mere act of believing is a meritorious substitute for all the other acts which might have been demanded of the sinner.

From this over-estimate of human merit in the exercise of faith, men sometimes run into the opposite

extreme, and hold that simple trust or faith in Christ dispenses with all moral obligation. They admit that the sinner has no merit, but deny that he has need of any, either another's or his own, to recommend him to God's favour. The divine mercy to our lost race they consider as consisting in the nullification of the law and its demands. Faith is a saving act, not because of any merit in it, but because it acquiesces in the divine renunciation of all claim upon men's hearts or lives. It is a mere consent to do nothing or to do as they please, and a belief that God will exact nothing of them and expect nothing from them. When Christ says, therefore, "this is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent," it is equivalent to saying, there is no work to be done, and you have only to believe that there is none, in order to be saved. Now all this, I need scarcely say, is utterly at variance with the constant requisition of obedience, even from believers, and the uniform teaching of the Scripture, that "without holiness no man can see the Lord." This last erroneous view is the more dangerous because, irrational as it may seem, it is really a counterfeit or caricature of the true doctrine. It is right in representing faith in Christ, not as a meritorious act supplying all deficiencies, but as a mere reception of God's mercy, offered and exercised in Christ alone. It is only wrong, fatally and ruinously wrong, in representing a the object of their faith a sheer renunciation of God's claims on man's obedience, both in reference to the past and future, so that no atonement is re-

quired for one, and no reform or new obedience for the other. The inevitable tendency of such a doctrine is to "go on in sin that grace may abound." It is the doctrine of those who, as much as in them lies, make Christ the minister of sin; the language of whose hearts and lives is, "let us do evil that good may come;" of whom we may, without a breach of charity, repeat the apostolical anathema, "whose damnation is just." It is surely not of such that we are to learn the meaning of Christ's solemn declaration: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent."

The true meaning of the words, in their obvious acceptation, and as interpreted by other Scriptures, may be briefly summed up under two particulars. The first is, that our access to God and restoration to His favour are entirely independent of all merit or obedience upon our part. Neither the act of faith, nor any other act, nor all our acts and abstinences put together, can contribute in the least to our acceptance, as a meritorious ground or a procuring cause. The very impossibility of such a purchase constitutes the absolute necessity of Christ's atoning sacrifice. The three main facts of our condition are, that we are sinners, that our sins must be atoned for, and that we cannot atone for them. To meet this desperate emergency, by doing what was otherwise impossible, God sent his Son to take our place, to obey the law for us, and bear its penalty, incurred by previous transgression. The saving benefit of this great substitution and atonement is freely offered to us in the Gospel. Unreserved accept-

ance of it must of course exclude all reliance upon any merit of our own, and on that supposed to reside in the act of faith as well as every other. Unreserved acceptance of Christ's merit and atonement, to the exclusion of all other, is itself the faith required, and since this is all that we are called upon to do, as the procuring cause of our salvation, that is, simply to rely on Christ, and not upon ourselves or any other creature, it is no wonder that when self-righteous sinners ask Him, "what shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" His answer was, and still is, and still will be, till the day of grace is past forever, "this is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent."

If this view of the matter should still seem to favour antinomian license, such an impression is at once removed by looking at the other particular referred to, as essential to a full disclosure of the doctrine of the Bible upon this momentous subject. It is this, that if God, without denial of himself, could have forgiven sin and saved the sinner, by a sovereign act, without requiring an atonement, then he might have spared, and must have spared, the untold agonies endured by his Son. That these were not spared, is itself a demonstration that atonement was absolutely necessary. And this absolute necessity implies that God's design, in saving man, was not to set aside the law, but to magnify and honour it. And this proof of His purpose, with respect to what is past, is a sufficient index of His will as to the future, a sufficient proof that He does not save men in sin but from sin, and that when be-

lief in Christ is represented as the saving work which God requires, it is not to the exclusion of good works in those who shall be saved, but rather as the source from which they are to flow, the only means by which they can even become possible. Whoever then would "work the works of God," in the most comprehensive sense, must begin by doing this, by believing on his Son, and then the rest may be expected to follow, not as conditions of salvation, which the faith itself has already appropriated and secured, but as the fragrant flowers and delicious fruits of that prolific seed which at the moment of believing was implanted in the heart by the almighty grace of God. To this, to all this, we are called in every invitation of the Gospel. If, with all this in our view, we are disposed to ask, as multitudes have asked before, and as thousands are now asking all around us, "what shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" the same Christ still stands ready to reply to us, as to the Jews of old, "this is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent."