

INSTITUTES  
OF  
THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

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BOOK THIRD.

THE MODE OF OBTAINING THE GRACE OF CHRIST. THE  
BENEFITS IT CONFERS, AND THE EFFECTS RESULTING FROM IT.

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CHAPTER XV.

THE BOASTED MERIT OF WORKS SUBVERSIVE BOTH OF THE GLORY  
OF GOD, IN BESTOWING RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND OF THE  
CERTAINTY OF SALVATION.

The divisions of this chapter are,—I. To the doctrine of free justification is opposed the question, Whether or not works merit favour with God, sec. 1. This question answered, sec. 2 and 3. II. An exposition of certain passages of Scripture produced in support of the erroneous doctrine of merit, sec. 4 and 5. III. Sophisms of Semipelagian Schoolmen refuted, sec. 6 and 7. IV. Conclusion, proving the sufficiency of the orthodox doctrine, sec. 8.

*Sections.*

1. After a brief recapitulation, the question, Whether or not good works merit favour with God, considered.
2. First answer, fixing the meaning of the term Merit. This term improperly applied to works, but used in a good sense, as by Augustine, Chrysostom, Bernard.
3. A second answer to the question. First by a negative, then by a concession. In the rewarding of works what to be attributed to God, and what to man. Why good works please God, and are advantageous to those who do them. The ingratitude of seeking righteousness by works. This shown by a double similitude.
4. First objection taken from Ecclesiasticus. Second objection from the Epistle to the Hebrews. Two answers to both objections. A weak distinction refuted.
5. A third and most complete answer, calling us back to Christ as the only foundation of salvation. How Christ is our righteousness. Whence it is manifest that we have all things in Christ and he nothing in us.
6. We must abhor the sophistry which destroys the merit of Christ, in order to establish that of man. This impiety refuted by clear passages of Scripture.
7. Errors of the younger Sophists extracted from Lombard. Refuted by Augustine. Also by Scripture.
8. Conclusion, showing that the foundation which has been laid is sufficient for doctrine, exhortation, and comfort. Summary of the orthodox doctrine of Justification.

1. THE principal point in this subject has been now explained: as justification, if dependant upon works, cannot possibly stand in the sight of God, it must depend solely on the mercy of God and communion with Christ, and therefore on faith alone. But let us carefully attend to the point on which the whole subject hinges, lest we get entangled in the common delusion, not only of the vulgar, but of the learned. For the moment the question is raised as to the justification by faith or works, they run off to those passages which seem to ascribe some merit to works in the sight of God, just as if justification by works were proved whenever it is proved that works have any value with God. Above we have clearly shown that justification by works consists only in a perfect and absolute fulfilment of the law; and that, therefore, no man is justified by works unless he has reached the summit of perfection, and cannot be convicted of even the smallest transgression. But there is another and a separate question, Though works by no means suffice to justify, do they not merit favour with God?

2. First, I must premise with regard to the term Merit, that he, whoever he was, that first applied it to human works, viewed in reference to the divine tribunal, consulted very ill for the purity of the faith. I willingly abstain from disputes about words, but I could wish that Christian writers had always observed this soberness—that when there was no occasion for it, they had never thought of using terms foreign to the Scriptures—terms which might produce much offence, but very little fruit. I ask, what need was there to introduce the word Merit, when the value of works might have been fully expressed by another term, and without offence? The quantity of offence contained in it the world shows to its great loss. It is certain that, being a high sounding term, it can only obscure the grace of God, and inspire men with pernicious pride. I admit it was used by ancient ecclesiastical writers, and I wish they had not by the abuse of one term furnished posterity with matter of heresy, although in some passages they themselves show that they had no wish to injure the truth. For Augustine says, “Let human merits, which perished by Adam, here be silent, and let the grace of God reign by Jesus Christ,” (August. de Prædest. Sanct.) Again, “The saints ascribe nothing to their merits; every thing will they ascribe solely to thy mercy, O God,” (August. in Psal. cxxxix.) Again, “And when a man sees that whatever good he has he has not of himself, but of his God, he sees that every thing in him which is praised is not of his own merits, but of the divine mercy,” (August. in Psal. lxxxviii.) You see how he denies man the power of acting aright, and thus lays merit prostrate. Chrysostom says, “If any works of ours follow the free calling of God, they are return and debt; but the gifts of God are grace, and beneficence, and great liberality.” But to say nothing more of the name, let us attend to the thing. I formerly quoted a passage from Bernard: “As it is sufficient for

merit not to presume on merit, so to be without merit is sufficient for condemnation," (Bernard in Cantic. Serm. 98.) He immediately adds an explanation which softens the harshness of the expression, when he says, "Hence be careful to have merits; when you have them, know that they were given; hope for fruit from the divine mercy, and you have escaped all the perils of poverty, ingratitude, and presumption. Happy the Church which neither wants merit without presumption, nor presumption without merit." A little before he had abundantly shown that he used the words in a sound sense, saying, "Why is the Church anxious about merits? God has furnished her with a firmer and surer ground of boasting. God cannot deny himself; he will do what he has promised. Thus there is no reason for asking by what merits may we hope for blessings; especially when you hear, 'Thus saith the Lord God; I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake,' (Ezek. xxxvi. 22.) It suffices for merit to know that merits suffice not."

3. What all our works can merit Scripture shows when it declares that they cannot stand the view of God, because they are full of impurity; it next shows what the perfect observance of the law (if it can anywhere be found) will merit when it enjoins, "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants, we have done that which was our duty to do," (Luke xvii. 10;) because we make no free-offering to God, but only perform due service by which no favour is deserved. And yet those good works which the Lord has bestowed upon us he counts ours also, and declares, that they are not only acceptable to him, but that he will recompense them. It is ours in return to be animated by this great promise, and to keep up our courage, that we may not weary in well-doing, but feel duly grateful for the great kindness of God. There cannot be a doubt, that every thing in our works which deserves praise is owing to divine grace, and that there is not a particle of it which we can properly ascribe to ourselves. If we truly and seriously acknowledge this, not only confidence, but every idea of merit vanishes. I say we do not, like the Sophists, share the praise of works between God and man, but we keep it entire and unimpaired for the Lord. All we assign to man is, that, by his impurity, he pollutes and contaminates the very works which were good. The most perfect thing which proceeds from man is always polluted by some stain. Should the Lord, therefore, bring to judgment the best of human works, he would indeed behold his own righteousness in them; but he would also behold man's dishonour and disgrace. Thus good works please God, and are not without fruit to their authors, since, by way of recompense, they obtain more ample blessings from God, not because they so deserve, but because the divine benignity is pleased of itself to set this value upon them. Such, however, is our malignity, that, not contented with

this liberality on the part of God, which bestows rewards on works that do not at all deserve them, we with profane ambition maintain that that which is entirely due to the divine munificence is paid to the merit of works. Here I appeal to every man's common sense. If one who by another's liberality possesses the usufruct of a field, rear up a claim to the property of it, does he not by his ingratitude deserve to lose the possession formerly granted? In like manner, if a slave, who has been manumitted, conceals his humble condition of freedman, and gives out that he was free-born, does he not deserve to be reduced to his original slavery? A benefit can only be legitimately enjoyed when we neither arrogate more to ourselves than has been given, nor defraud the author of it of his due praise; nay, rather when we so conduct ourselves as to make it appear that the benefit conferred still in a manner resides with him who conferred it. But if this is the moderation to be observed towards men, let every one reflect and consider for himself what is due to God.

4. I know that the Sophists abuse some passages in order to prove that the Scriptures use the term *merit* with reference to God. They quote a passage from Ecclesiasticus: "Mercy will give place to every man according to the merit of his works," (Ecclesiasticus xvi. 14;) and from the Epistle to the Hebrews: "To do good and communicate forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased," (Heb. xiii. 16.) I now renounce my right to repudiate the authority of Ecclesiasticus; but I deny that the words of Ecclesiasticus, whoever the writer may have been, are faithfully quoted. The Greek is as follows: Greek is as follows: Πάσῃ ἐλεημοσύνῃ ποιήσει τόπον ἐκαστος γάρ κατά, τα ἔργα αυτού ευρησει. "He will make room for all mercy: for each shall find according to his works." That this is the genuine reading, and has been corrupted in the Latin version, is plain, both from the very structure of the sentence, and from the previous context. In the Epistle to the Hebrews there is no room for their quibbling on one little word, for in the Greek the Apostle simply says, that *such sacrifices are pleasing* and acceptable to God. This alone should amply suffice to quell and beat down the insolence of our pride, and prevent us from attaching value to works beyond the rule of Scripture. It is the doctrine of Scripture, moreover, that our good works are constantly covered with numerous stains by which God is justly offended and made angry against us, so far are they from being able to conciliate him, and call forth his favour towards us; and yet because of his indulgence, he does not examine them with the utmost strictness, he accepts them just as if they were most pure; and therefore rewards them, though undeserving, with innumerable blessings, both present and future. For I admit not the distinction laid down by otherwise learned and pious men, that good works merit the favours which are conferred upon us in this life, whereas eternal life is the reward

of faith. only. The recompense of our toils, and crown of our contest, our Lord almost uniformly places in heaven. On the other hand, to attribute to the merit of works, so as to deny it to grace, that we are loaded with other gifts from the Lord, is contrary to the doctrine of Scripture. For though Christ says, “Unto every one that hath shall be given;” “thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things,” (Matth. xxv. 29, 21,) he, at the same time, shows that all additional gifts to believers are of his free benignity: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money, come ye, buy, and eat: yea, come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price,” (Isaiah lv. 1.) Therefore, every help to salvation bestowed upon believers, and blessedness itself, are entirely the gift of God, and yet in both the Lord testifies that he takes account of works, since to manifest the greatness of his love toward us, he thus highly honours not ourselves only, but the gifts which he has bestowed upon us.

5. Had these points been duly handled and digested in past ages, never could so many tumults and dissensions have arisen. Paul says, that in the architecture of Christian doctrine, it is necessary to retain the foundation which he had laid with the Corinthians, “Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ,” (1 Cor. iii. 11.) What then is our foundation in Christ? Is it that he begins salvation and leaves us to complete it? Is it that he only opened up the way, and left us to follow it in our own strength? By no means, but as Paul had a little before declared, it is to acknowledge that he has been given us for righteousness. No man, therefore, is well founded in Christ who has not entire righteousness in him, since the Apostle says not that he was sent to assist us in procuring, but was himself to be our righteousness. Thus it is said that God “hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world,” not according to our merit, but “according to the good pleasure of his will that in him “we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins;” that peace has been made “through the blood of his cross;” that we are reconciled by his blood; that, placed under his protection, we are delivered from the danger of finally perishing; that thus ingrafted into him we are made partakers of eternal life, and hope for admission into the kingdom of God.\* Nor is this all. Being admitted to participation in him, though we are still foolish, he is our wisdom; though we are still sinners, he is our righteousness; though we are unclean, he is our purity; though we are weak, unarmed, and exposed to Satan, yet ours is the power which has been given him in heaven and in earth, to bruise Satan under our feet, and burst the gates of hell, (Matth. xxviii. 18;) though we still bear about with us a body of death, he is our

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\* 1 Cor. i. 30; Eph. i. 3-5; Col. i. 14, 20; John i. 12; x. 28.

life; in short, all things of his are ours, we have all things in him, he nothing in us. On this foundation, I say, we must be built, if we would grow up into a holy temple in the Lord.

6. For a long time the world has been taught very differently. A kind of good works called *moral* has been found out, by which men are rendered agreeable to God before they are ingrafted into Christ; as if Scripture spoke falsely when it says, “He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life,” (1 John v. 12.) How can they produce the materials of life if they are dead? Is there no meaning in its being said, that “whatsoever is not of faith is sin?” (Rom. xiv. 23;) or can good fruit be produced from a bad tree? What have these most pestilential Sophists left to Christ on which to exert his virtue? They say that he merited for us the first grace, that is, the occasion of meriting, and that it is our part not to let slip the occasion thus offered. O the daring effrontery of impiety! Who would have thought that men professing the name of Christ would thus strip him of his power, and all but trample him under foot? The testimony uniformly borne to him in Scripture is, that whoso believeth in him is justified; the doctrine of these men is, that the only benefit which proceeds from him is to open up a way for each to justify himself. I wish they could get a taste of what is meant by these passages: “He that hath the Son hath life.” “He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me,” “is passed from death unto life.”

Whoso believeth in him “is passed from death unto life.” “Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” “He that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him.” God “hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ.” “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.”\* There are similar passages without number. Their meaning is not, that by faith in Christ an opportunity is given us of procuring justification, or acquiring salvation, but that both are given us. Hence, so soon as you are ingrafted into Christ by faith, you are made a son of God, an heir of heaven, a partaker of righteousness, a possessor of life, and (the better to manifest the false tenets of these men) you have not obtained an opportunity of meriting, but all the merits of Christ, since they are communicated to you.

7. In this way the schools of Sorbonne, the parents of all heresies, have deprived us of justification by faith, which lies at the root of all godliness. They confess, indeed, in word, that men are justified by a formed faith, but they afterwards explain, this to mean that of faith they have good works, which avail to justification, so that they almost seem to use the term faith in

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\* 1 John v. 12; John v. 24; Rom. iii. 24; 1 John iii. 24; Eph. ii. 6; Col. i. 13.

mockery, because they were unable, without incurring great obloquy, to pass it in silence, seeing it is so often repeated by Scripture. And yet not contented with this, they by the praise of good works transfer to man what they steal from God. And seeing that good works give little ground for exultation, and are not even properly called merits, if they are regarded as the fruits of divine grace, they derive them from the power of free-will; in other words, extract oil out of stone. They deny not that the principal cause is in grace; but they contend that there is no exclusion of free-will through which all merit comes. This is the doctrine, not only of the later Sophists, but of Lombard their Pythagoras, (*Sent. Lib. ii. Dist. 28.*) who, in comparison of them, may be called sound and sober. It was surely strange blindness, while he had Augustine so often in his mouth, not to see how cautiously he guarded against ascribing a single particle of praise to man because of good works. Above, when treating of free-will, we quoted some passages from him to this effect, and similar passages frequently occur in his writings, (see in *Psal. civ.; Ep. cv.*,) as when he forbids us ever to boast of our merits, because they themselves also are the gifts of God, and when he says that all our merits are only of grace, are not provided by our sufficiency, but are entirely the production of grace, &c. It is less strange that Lombard was blind to the light of Scripture, in which it is obvious that he had not been a very successful student.\* Still there cannot be a stronger declaration against him and his disciples than the words of the Apostle, who, after interdiciting all Christians from glorying, subjoins the reason why glorying is unlawful: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them,” (*Eph. ii. 10.*) Seeing, then, that no good proceeds from us unless in so far as we are regenerated—and our regeneration is without exception wholly of God—there is no ground for claiming to ourselves one iota in good works. Lastly, while these men constantly inculcate good works, they, at the same time, train the conscience in such a way as to prevent it from venturing to confide that works will render God favourable and propitious. We, on the contrary, without any mention of merit, give singular comfort to believers when we teach them that in their works they please, and doubtless are accepted of God. Nay, here we even insist that no man shall attempt or enter upon any work without faith, that is, unless he previously have a firm conviction that it will please God.

8. Wherfore, let us never on any account allow ourselves to be drawn away one nail’s breadth† from that only foundation. After it is laid, wise

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\* French, “d’autant qu’il n’y estoit gueres exercité;” —inasmuch as he was little versant in it.

† French, “ne fust ce que de la pointe d’une espingle;” —were it only a pin’s point.

architects build upon it rightly and in order. For whether there is need of doctrine or exhortation, they remind us that “for this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil;” that “whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin;” that “the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles;” that the elect of God are vessels of mercy, appointed “to honour,” purged, “sanctified, and meet for the Master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.” The whole is expressed at once, when Christ thus describes his disciples, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”\* He who has denied himself has cut off the root of all evil, so as no longer to seek his own; he who has taken up his cross has prepared himself for all meekness and endurance. The example of Christ includes this and all offices of piety and holiness. He obeyed his Father even unto death; his whole life was spent in doing the works of God; his whole soul was intent on the glory of his Father; he laid down his life for the brethren; he did good to his enemies, and prayed for them. And when there is need of comfort, it is admirably afforded in these words: “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.” “For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him; if we suffer, we shall also reign with him;” by means of “the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;” the Father having predestinated us “to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren.” Hence it is, that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord;”† nay, rather all things will work together for our good. See how it is that we do not justify men before God by works, but say, that all who are of God are regenerated and made new creatures, so that they pass from the kingdom of sin into the kingdom of righteousness. In this way they make their calling sure, and, like trees, are judged by their fruits.

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\* 1 John iii. 8; 1 Pet. iv. 3; 2 Tim. ii. 20, 21; Luke ix. 23.

† 2 Cor. iv. 8; 2 Tim. ii. 11; Phil. iii. 10; Rom. viii. 29, 39.