

# Whose Doing Is It? God's or Man's

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Whose Doing Is It – Part 3

August 29, 2010

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## I. Preparatory Information

A. **Romans 11:33-36** . . . Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! [34] For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? [35] Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? [36] For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

## B. Prayer

## II. Whose Doing Is It? God's or Man's

A. Most of the following arrangement of the scriptures comes from John Cassian's Thirteenth Conference. It was spoken by Chaeremon, who was over one hundred years old at the time he spoke it to Cassian. The scriptures that he quoted were quoted from memory, for at that time it was the goal of the devout Christian to memorize the entire Bible. I have edited this conference and in places, paraphrased what Cassian wrote. The scriptures that I will quote come from the NASB, 1995 revision.

B. In case some of us have forgotten, let me remind you that there has been a debate within the church for the past five hundred years over the topic of our study today, that is, a debate between those who hold that salvation and sanctification are all God's doing and those who hold that salvation and sanctification are man's doing in so far as man has a free will, and therefore is given the responsibility by God to use his free will to make choices that put him in the place to receive God's gracious gift of salvation and to persevere in pursuing Christ-likeness upon being born-again. Of course, the vast majority of those who hold to the free will side of "Whose doing is it," also hold that none of this is possible without the gracious empowerment and assistance of God.

1. Regardless of what you choose to believe about it being all God's doing or a combination of God and man's doing, one ingredient we all need as we consider, discuss, and even debate this issue is humility. And let me give you three reasons why we need humility.

- a. First, we need humility because it is only too easy and too tempting – with the devil’s help – to think of our view as spiritually, biblically, and logically superior to the other view.
  - b. Second, each view has been held and taught by some of God’s most serious minded children – and some of these Christians have had lives that shine brighter than ours, service to God that demonstrates a more comprehensive death to self than ours, an understanding of the scriptures that is richer than ours, and a spiritual maturity that is superior to ours. How can we not be humble before such Christians as these?
  - c. Third, regardless of how right our view is, without humility we will take on an attitude of superiority and behave – in relation to our view – in ways that dishonor God, degrade our Christian character, and damage the unity of the Church.
2. The reality is that pride over our doctrinal and theological positions only serves to advance the devil’s purposes and set us against God’s purposes. Therefore, humility is essential as we proceed in our study today.

Last Sunday we ended with this statement: Our sovereign and gracious God always works together with our will in the pursuit of what is right and good – helping our will, and even protecting it when it is too weak to defend itself (I Corinthians 10:13). Yet even in protecting our will from certain attacks of the enemy, God does not free us from His demands and expectations regarding purity of heart and holiness of life. And though He does not overcome the foolish inclinations of the spiritually lazy, He confers His grace with immeasurable generosity on any meager and small effort that comes from a sincere heart.

Consider the repentant attitude and faith of the thief on the cross. Though he made the request for eternal salvation, the promise of paradise in the hereafter was not earned but rather graciously given. Nor was it the repentance of King David – expressed in the brief phrase: “I have sinned against the Lord” (II Samuel 12:13a) – that removed those two very serious sins of his. Rather it was God’s mercy – and undeserved mercy at that – which led to the prophet Nathan saying: “The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die” (II Samuel 12:13b). That David added murder to adultery was indeed due to free will, but his being rebuked by the prophet was a matter of God’s great grace. That David humbly acknowledged his sin was an act of his will, but that he was so quickly promised forgiveness for such great crimes was a gift of our merciful Lord.

Therefore, though it is an act of our will to strive in the pursuit of repentance and in being holy as God is holy, we can never strive enough to reach the level of being owed eternal salvation. And though we may make great progress in becoming holy as He is holy, we can never change the fact that we are unworthy recipients of His gracious gift of eternal life, His gracious gift of a new nature, His gracious gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, His gracious gift of an indwelling power sufficient to drive out sin and live the Christ-like life, and the numerous other blessings He confers on those who are, by faith, His children.

We again see this truth portrayed in the scriptures when the teacher of the Gentiles testifies that he has received his apostleship by the grace of God, for he says: “By the grace of God I am what I am” (I Corinthians 15:10a). But he doesn’t stop there. He goes on to say that he responded to God’s grace when he adds: “His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (I Corinthians 15:10b). Now when he says: “but I labored,” he is indicating the effort of his own will. When he says: “Yet not I, but the grace of God,” he is pointing to the power of God at work in him. And when he adds those two words, “with me,” he is declaring that God’s gracious empowerment has worked together – not with a lazy or careless person, but with one who of his own will labors and toils in the service of God.

We read that God made a way for Job to exercise his will in the face of temptation on that day when the devil slanderously claimed Job would turn on God without God’s sovereign and gracious protection and provision. When asked if he had considered the uprightness of Job, Satan said to God: “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face” (Job 1:9-11).

In response to the devil’s accusation God said: “Behold, all that Job has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him” (Job 1:12). So Satan departed from the presence of God and attacked Job’s possessions and his children. “Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. Job said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.’ Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God” (Job 1:20-22).

Now if Job had remained faithful to God during this attack from Satan by the empowerment of God’s grace alone, and if he had endured Satan’s cruel trials

and destruction only by God's assistance, then the devil would know he had no chance of turning Job against God. But since that wasn't the case, the devil returned to God and uttered these words against Job before God: "Skin for skin! *(i.e., a person will sacrifice part of his body to preserve his whole body; for example, we'll hold up our arm – allowing it to suffer pain or loss – to deflect a blow to our head)* Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. However, put forth Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face" (Job 2:4-5).

So the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life. Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And Job took a fragment of pottery to scrape himself while he was sitting among the ashes" (Job 2:6-8).

Though the slanderous enemy of our soul persuaded God to remove His hand of protection from Job so as to allow Job to fight against Satan's attacks by his own strength, Job did not curse God or sin against God. Yet it must not be believed that the grace of God was in any way lacking or deficient toward Job during those days, for God graciously gave the devil only as much power to try Job as God knew that Job had the strength to resist. Now God intervened to this degree without protecting Job in such a way that he had no opportunity to exercise his will in doing good. In other words, God kept Satan's attack on Job a fair fight by preventing the raging enemy from attacking Job with an excessively wicked trial and hence overcoming him in his weakened condition.

Again in the Old Testament we read that our all wise and gracious God chose to test the faith of Abraham – the one whom God appointed the father of all who live by faith (Genesis 22:1; Romans 4:11-12,16). And God was testing, not the faith which He himself had put in Abraham, but that which Abraham displayed of his own free will in response to being called and enlightened by the Lord. We see the evidence of this when, after Abraham's faith was proven to be unwavering, God mercifully came to his aid and said: "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (Genesis 22:12).

We have been told quite clearly that by the will of our gracious God this kind of testing can come upon us all for the sake of proving us. In Deuteronomy, God said: "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let

us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him” (Deuteronomy 13:1-4).

Are we to suppose that when God permits this prophet or dreamer to arise that He will protect us to the extent that our free will has no room to be tested in a way that proves the strength of our faith toward God? And why is it necessary for God to test His people at all if He knows they are so weak and frail that they are utterly unable to resist by their own will the one who is tempting them? Surely the righteousness of God would not have allowed Job and Abraham, and the many others who are His people to be tested if He did not know that they could freely exercise an equivalent power of resistance so that they could be justly judged as guilty or praiseworthy according to their response to the test.

Listen to what the scriptures teach according to the Apostle Paul: “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (I Corinthians 10:12-13).

When the Apostle says: “let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall,” he is warning free will, which he knows can – once it has received grace from God – either stand by its own good effort or fall by its own negligence. When the Apostle says: “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man,” he is warning them against thinking of themselves as too weak to resist or thinking they are the only ones being tempted in this way, because such thinking feeds self-pity and a readiness to accept failure. (Now it is important to clarify here that in saying all our temptations are common temptations, Paul was not denying the strength of temptation, for he also said: “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12)). And when the Apostle adds: “and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able,” he is confirming that God allows us to be tempted but never in a way greater than our current strength can bear. Therefore, that God allows us to be tempted indicates the power of free will, whereas God’s preventing us from being tempted beyond our current ability to resist indicates God’s protective grace.

In all these examples, we see that God tests the human will in such a way that though we enjoy His gracious empowerment and protection, we can, by an act of our will, choose what we know is wrong. Yet in spite of our free will, God does not make us fight our spiritual enemies by our own efforts alone. He has granted to us everything necessary for life and godliness, including many precious and magnificent promises, along with the privilege to become a partaker of His nature (II Peter 1:3-4).

There are two reasons God established this system of working together. First, so that we may humbly praise His gracious assistance when we are victorious and humbly confess our own weakness when we are defeated. Second, so that we will learn not to trust in our own strength, but rather to trust in His gracious assistance as we turn to Him alone for grace, strength and protection.

Now it is possible that you still think this is our own interpretation of scripture and not the clear testimony of what God's Word says. If that is the case, let us read what God said to Israel in the book of Judges: "So the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He said, 'Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers and has not listened to My voice, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the Lord to walk in it as their fathers did, or not' " (Judges 2:20-22).

Now let us take a human example to help us understand the incomparable mercy of our Creator in testing us. Admittedly, a human example can never equal the greatness of our God, but the similarity – as far as loving-kindness is concerned – can increase our understanding of God goodness. Imagine a good and careful nurse, who carries a small child in her arms for a long while, so that eventually she might teach him to walk. First she lets him crawl, then holds him upright with her hand so that he will be supported at each step, then pulls away a little bit, only to grasp him at once when she sees that he is wavering. She steadies him when he is tottering, picks him up when he has fallen, and either prevents him from falling or lets him fall lightly, and always lovingly lifting him up after a tumble. But when she has brought him to boyhood or to the strength of adolescence and young manhood, she lays upon him some burdens and hardships, not to oppress him but to exercise him. She even lets him compete against his peers. How much more does the heavenly Father of all know whom to carry in the arms of His grace and whom to exercise for godliness's sake through the use of free will. And yet all the while God is helping him as he struggles through the

exercise, hearing him when he calls, constantly remaining by his side, and occasionally even snatching him from danger that he is not yet aware is dangerous.

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways” (Romans 11:33). Surely this marvelous truth applies to the ways in which God draws the human race to salvation and assists us in acquiring a pure heart and holy life through the process of sanctification. Therefore, we will continue to examine the truth of this scripture by looking at more examples of God’s doing and man’s doing from the scripture.

By the actions of his own position and power – and yet according to the will of His Father – Christ chose Andrew, Peter, and the other apostles even though they were not thinking of healing, casting out of demons, and fishing for men. He not only promised Zaccheus salvation at that very hour of Zaccheus’ repentance, He honored him with the blessing of a visit to his home (Luke 19:2-10). He drew Paul to salvation while Paul was in a state of open rebellion and on his way to persecute more Christians (Acts 9:1-19). To another who asked to follow Him as soon as he had buried his father and mother, Jesus said: “Follow Me [now], and allow the dead to bury their own dead” (Matthew 8:21-22). To Cornelius, who was constantly intent on prayer and almsgiving, the way of salvation was shown as a reward, and through the visitation of an angel Cornelius was told to summon Peter and to hear the words of salvation from him so that he and all his household would be saved (Acts 10).

Looking beyond these examples, consider the many and various ways God in His wisdom has graciously dispensed healing – not in a uniform manner based on His power to heal, but according to the degree of faith that He finds in each person. For when someone believed that the will of Christ alone was enough to cleanse him of his leprosy, Christ responded by saying: “I am willing; be cleansed” (Matthew 8:2-3). When a synagogue official begged Jesus to come and raise his dead daughter by laying His hand on her, Jesus entered his house and raised her up just as the official asked Him to do (Matthew 9:18-25). When a centurion said to Jesus: “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed” (Matthew 8:8), Jesus healed the paralysis by a word of command, saying: “Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very moment (Matthew 8:13). When a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years hoped for healing by touching the hem of His garment, Jesus immediately bestowed the gift of health on her (Matthew 9:20-21).

To some He granted healing for their sickness when He was asked. To others He voluntarily offered healing (i.e., a widow's only son who had died, Luke 7:11-15). He encouraged others to hope by asking: "Do you wish to get well" (John 5:6)? To others who were without hope he brought help (i.e., the Gerasene Demoniac, Mark 5:1-20). He searched out the desires of two blind men before satisfying their need, by asking: "What do you want Me to do for you" (Matthew 20:32)? When healing another two blind men, He asked: "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then Jesus touched their eyes, saying, "It shall be done to you according to your faith" (Matthew 9:28-29). To the Canaanite woman who asked that He heal her daughter, He tested her faith by saying: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." When she persisted, He said: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she remained steadfast in her request for help, humbling herself before Him and saying: "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table," to which Jesus said: "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish" (Matthew 15:24-28). To Mary, the brother of Lazarus, who did not know how to obtain what she longed for, He kindly showed her what she needed when He said: "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God" (John 11:40)?

So abundantly did he pour forth His healing power among others that Matthew recalls of them: "He healed [all] their sick" (Matthew 14:14). But among others, that bottomless pit of Christ's loving deeds was so stopped up that it is said: "He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them" (Mark 6:5-6). And why could he do so few miracles there? Because of their unbelief. Therefore, we see in the scripture that God's bountiful loving-kindness – especially in relation to healing – is measured out according to the capacity of human faith.

However, no one should think that we have said these things in an attempt to prove that the whole of salvation or sanctification or receiving God's provision or enjoying God's protection or experiencing other of God's gracious miracles are entirely dependent on our faith, as is the godless opinion of some who attribute everything to free will. These are those who think that the grace of God is dispensed or supplied to each person according to what each person deserves. Therefore, we counter such false beliefs by clearly and firmly affirming that the grace of God is always greater than our efforts, and at times, it surpasses our weak faith.

We read that this was true in the case of that royal official in the Gospel of John who – believing that his sick son could more easily be healed by Jesus than raised from the dead – pleaded with Jesus, saying: “Sir, come down before my child dies” (John 4:49). Although Jesus rebuked his lack of faith with these words: “Unless you see signs and wonders, you do not believe” (John 4:48), He did not respond to the official’s request according to his weak faith. Rather, Jesus healed the child – not by his bodily presence or according to the man’s faith, but according to His own power, when He said: “Go, your son lives” (John 5:50).

We also read that the Lord poured out His overflowing grace in the healing of the paralytic by first bringing health to the soul of the one who came asking for a healing of his body. “Take courage, son,” Jesus said, “your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:2). At this, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This fellow blasphemes.” And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, “Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” Jesus then turned to the paralytic and said, “Get up, pick up your bed and go home” (Matthew 9:4-6).

Jesus displayed the breadth of his gracious generosity in the case of the man who for thirty-eight years had been lying helpless by the side of the pool, Bethesda, hoping for healing from the movement of the water. Seeing him lying there and knowing he had been there a long time, Jesus asked: “Do you wish to get well?” The man, complaining about the hopelessness of his situation because of his lack of human assistance, said: “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me.” Jesus, overlooking his faithless despair, mercifully restored him to his former health – not as the man expected but as Jesus willed, by saying: “Get up, pick up your pallet and walk” (John 5:2-9).

The wonder of these deeds accomplished by our Lord’s power do not stop with Him, for He worked similar things through His servants. When Peter and John were going up to the Temple and the man who was lame from his mother's womb asked for alms, they did not give the paltry coins that the lame man requested, but rather they gave the ability to walk. In other words, the one who was hoping for the relief provided by a small offering, they enriched with the prize of an unhoped-for healing. In the words of Peter: “I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene – walk!” (Acts 3:6).

From all these examples which we have produced from the gospel writings it ought to be very clear that God provides for the salvation, the sanctification, the provision, the protection and the healing of the human race in numberless different manners and in sometimes mysterious, paradoxical, perplexing and inexplicable ways. Therefore, when we pray for God's gracious assistance, and when He provides us with help in our struggles, and supports and defends us when we seek refuge, He is our helper and supporter. When He works His grace in us apart from our seeking it, and when He reaches out to us before we have reached out to Him, or when He draws us while we are unaware and even unwilling, He is our savior and protector. When He helps us to accomplish the things we seek to do for His glory – as a result of knowing His will – He is our helper and supporter. And when He inspires and stirs within us that holy desire to see what we need to do and continue doing it so as to persevere in it, He is our savior and protector.

Therefore, we return again to the words of the Apostle who said, while reflecting on the numerous and varied ways of God and while seeing that he himself had fallen into the boundless sea of God's goodness: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor" (Romans 11:33-34)?

And who are we that we, by human reason, could understand and therefore know more than the one who wrote those blessed words about the unsearchable and unfathomable ways of God? Surely, those who confidently think they know the mind of God concerning the salvation and life of the Christian – as to it being all God's doing or all man's doing – are certainly resisting the truth of the Apostle's words and declaring with unholy audacity that the judgments of God are readily searchable and that His ways are easily understood.

God himself compares His judgments and ways – which He pours out on us with untiring kindness and unending grace, for our benefit – to the most tender heart of a loving mother. In making this comparison He says: "Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb" (Isaiah 49:15a)? Not satisfied with this comparison, He immediately goes beyond it and says: "Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands" (Isaiah 49:15b-16a).

From all this it is clear that there is God's doing and there is our doing. There is God's empowerment, God's grace, God's protection, and God's giving of the divine nature, along with numerous and varied forms of divine assistance. And then

there is our repentance, our faith, our putting off the old self and putting on the new, our submitting to God, our resisting the devil, our setting our mind on the things above, and our drawing near to God. For this reason, God himself says: “The race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; but one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (Ecclesiastes 9:11; I Corinthians 12:11). And He also says through the Apostle: “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable” (I Corinthians 9:24-25).

Therefore it is understood by all the Church fathers, who have taught purity of heart and holiness of life, not by mere words but by example, that God’s first action of grace is to inflame each person to desire what is good, yet in such a way that their free will can still choose between good and evil. Likewise, God’s second part of grace is to ensure that the pursuit of a pure heart and a holy life bear results, yet in such a way that the possibility of choice is not removed. The third part of God’s grace is His empowerment, protection and assistance so that we persevere in pursuing and living a holy life to the end of our days, yet in such a way that our freedom to submit is always a freedom to do or not do His will.

Thus it is that we are to believe that the God of the universe works all things in all, so that He stirs up, protects and strengthens, but not so that He removes the freedom of will that He himself has granted. If something cleverly gleaned from human argumentation and reasoning seems contrary to this understanding, it should be avoided rather than held up as God’s way, for such thinking and teaching will bring about the destruction of the faith. For we do not acquire faith from understanding but understanding from faith. For how God works all things in us on the one hand and how so much is ascribed to free will on the other cannot be fully grasped by human intelligence and reason. But it can be experienced, each and every day, by faith.

III. Conclusion – God’s part and our part do not represent two distinct, separate parts, but rather the merging of two parts into one complete whole. Of the two parts involved – God and ours – God plays the major role and we play the minor role. Our part is relatively simple. In essence, we are to trust in God and love God – and give practical application to our faith and love by obeying God.