

Whose Doing Is It God's Or Man's?

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Edited and Paraphrased in some places by DSB

Scripture Used: NASB 1995

[Most of this material comes from John Cassian's Thirteenth Conference. It was spoken by Chaeremon, who was over one hundred years old. His back was so bent with age and from constant prayer that he went about with his hands touching the ground. The scriptures that he quoted were quoted from memory, for at that time it was the goal of the devout Christian to memorize the Bible.]

In the realm of the Christian life, and especially in the arena of sanctification – where we are being conformed to the image of Christ through God's gracious work within us, what is the value of human effort? Though we strive with all our might and toil with the perseverance of the most saintly saints, would we be able to possess the great good of godliness, or the provision of our most basic physical and spiritual needs, or the protection necessary to continue on in life, without the generosity of God's gracious giving? And yet, shouldn't the laborer's reward, that is, the perfection of the Christian life or the accumulation of food, clothing and shelter, which requires a daily intensity of one's own efforts, be attributed to the laborer? For example, when we see a farmer day-by-day hard at work toiling in the soil, shouldn't the harvest be attributed to his diligence?

Taking this example of the farmer, it should be obvious to us that his toil can accomplish nothing without the help of God. For a farmer, when he has expended all his efforts in working the field with a view toward harvest, would not be able to attribute the produce of his fields, or even the abundance of the yield to his own toil. Consider, his toil would be useless if adequate rainfall and the absence of damaging winds, hail, or flooding had not played their part. In fact, we are aware of ripened, ready to be harvested crops that have been destroyed a day or two before harvest simply because the farmer had not been assisted by the Lord's gracious giving in some area that the farmer could not control.

My point here is simple. Working day and night will not be profitable to the farmer if his work is not assisted by the Lord's mercy.

Again, consider that the diligent, hard-working farmer can live so sinfully as to set the Lord against himself. When he does this, the scripture says that the heaven becomes brass and the earth iron (Deuteronomy 28:23). The swarming locusts eat what the cutting locusts leave behind, and the caterpillar devours what the swarming locust leave, and the blight consumes what the caterpillar has left (Joel 1:4).

Yet if the weather, the soil and the insects cooperate together to provide the hard-working farmer with a good crop by the generous mercy of God, it only takes a single debilitating accident to keep him from harvesting his crop.

From these examples it should be clear that all of these things – being outside the farmer’s control – depend upon the gracious involvement and abundant power of God. For as the scripture says, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). And again, “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness” (II Corinthians 9:10).

Now some will say that this understanding of God and His ways stands in opposition to the scriptures which teach free will. After all, it is said, even unbelievers, who do not deserve the grace of God’s assistance, show in their actions good deeds beyond what some Christians display. Does not this prove that the free will of even those who do not want to believe on Him is sufficient to perform good deeds?

Although these questions are worthy of the asking, they nevertheless display a shortsightedness in the ways of God as He deals with man. Upon clearing up the assumptions raised by these questions, I believe you will see – from the holy scriptures – the unmatched glory of God as it relates to His empowerment and gracious assistance toward us, and the responsibility of man as it relates to doing the will of Him whom we serve.

First, it should never be believed that the unbelievers who do good deeds have attained to the kind of purity of mind that is demanded of Christians in the scriptures. We are not just called by God to do good deeds. We are called by God to think good thoughts (Philippians 4:6-8) and through the renewal of our mind, come to live a holy life (Romans 12:2). For example, we are to go beyond the good deeds of moral behavior and faithfulness in marriage to not even casually conversing with each other about immorality, impurity, or greed. And beyond that, we are to turn away from silly talk and vulgar joking (Ephesians 5:3-4). The point is, even though unbelievers discipline themselves in certain ways to do good deeds, they show by other words and deeds that inwardly they still desire and delight in evil things. Therefore, though they have an outward good that is commendable, evil has not been cut out from their hearts.

Their way – outwardly good, inwardly still desiring what is evil – is not God’s way for His people. But who of us can be unified inwardly and outwardly without the assistance of God? Who will deny himself day after day, take up his cross each and every day, and live for Christ without the assistance of God (Luke 9:23)? Who will fight the good fight of faith: submitting to God in hard times as well as in good, resisting the devil when his temptations are at their strongest, and drawing near to God while being sorely tempted to draw near to earthy or personal pleasures or the praise of men or financial gain, without the empowerment of God (I Timothy 6:12; James 4:7-8)? Who will humble himself before God and his fellow men – labeling his sin as God labels it, speaking of his failures as the scripture speaks of them, weeping over his sin with a broken and remorseful heart, confessing openly and thoroughly, and making right with God and men whatever wrong he has committed – without the help of God? Who will forgive his brother seventy times seven without the inward strengthening of God (Matthew 18:21-22)? And so I ask again, who of us can be unified inwardly and outwardly without the gracious assistance of God?

Have you not been distracted from an ardent pursuit of holiness by conflicting interests, so as to feel an urgent need to ask God for help in securing sufficient time to carry out your longed for pursuit? Have you not experienced sickness or tribulations that seem so overwhelming as to plead with God for the grace and strength in the midst of such times to still commune with Him and continue growing in the grace and knowledge of our Savior? And so we see that having the ability is not enough if God does not assist with sufficient time to satisfy our longing for holiness. Yet it is also true that lacking the ability is not a deterrent for those who rely on God to empower them in accomplishing what their heart so strongly desires (I Thessalonians 2:18; II Corinthians 12:8-9).

Truly, God's purpose from the beginning is our salvation not our damnation. When His kindness sees the slightest glimmer of goodwill in us – which He himself has in fact sparked from the hard flint of our heart – He nurtures it, stirs it up and strengthens it with his grace because He “desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Timothy 2:4). For, He says, “it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (Matthew 18:14). And again he says, “God does not take away life, but plans ways so that the banished one will not be cast out from him” (II Samuel 14:14). And once more we read God's own oath when He says, “As I live!” declares the Lord God, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezekiel 33:11a).

Therefore, the grace of God – passed on to us through Jesus Christ our Lord – is at hand and available to us every day! It calls out to everyone, without exception, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Those who perish or lack God's empowerment for holy living do so against His will.

We see this clearly in relation to perishing, for God said, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezekiel 33:11a). And Christ himself said, “How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling” (Matthew 23:37b).

Regarding empowerment for holy living, we see – in the words of the Apostle Paul – that God's grace is always present and available to us when he says, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13), and again when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20).

This divine action – be it wooing us, convicting us, empowering us for holy living, assisting us in doing good, or putting a talking donkey in the way to turn us aside from our own foolishness – is driven by God's love for us, and is always present for us. So great is this love of the Creator for His creature that His protective care not only stands alongside us, it goes constantly before us. The prophet, who experienced this, states it very clearly when he says: “The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in

a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night” (Exodus 13:21).

And again, when God notices a desire for Him or for godliness springing up in us, at once He enlightens and encourages it and spurs it on, giving increase to what He himself planted and we nurtured by our own efforts. For, He says, “It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24). And again: “He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. When He hears it, He will answer you” (Isaiah 30:19).

Not only does God graciously inspire holy desires, He also arranges favorable moments in our life which hold the possibility of godly results – if we respond according to His will. And He shows the path of life to us when we are straying. The reality is, our human reason does not easily comprehend what appears to some as two opposing truths about the interaction between God and man – that is, how He gives to those who ask, is found by those who seek, and opens to those who knock (Matthew 7:7); and on the other hand, how He is found by those who do not seek, appears openly among these who were not asking for Him, stretches out His hands the whole day to a people who do not believe in Him and who stubbornly persist in their unbelief (Romans 10:20-21), calls those who resist and are far away, draws the unwilling to salvation, removes from those who want to sin the means of fulfilling their desire, and graciously hinders those who are hastening on to what is evil.

Returning to God’s doing and our doing in relation to salvation, who understands clearly how the choice to be saved is attributed to our will, about which it is said: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land” (Isaiah 1:19). And again God says, “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:22). And Jesus added, “Whoever believes in the Son will have eternal life” (John 3:15). Yet at the same time it says: “It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Romans 9:16). However, that very same Apostle tells us that God “renders to each person according to his deeds” (Romans 2:6). And yet he also wrote: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

It is almost impossible to misinterpret the meaning of these words: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). And yet Jesus said elsewhere: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44).

Consider this: “Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established” (Proverbs 4:26). And yet when we pray, do we not cry out and say: “O Lord, lead me in Your righteousness . . .and make Your way straight before me” (Psalms 5:8)? And again: “Lead me in paths of righteousness for Your name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3)?

Are we not admonished by God to: “Cast away all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 18:31)? And yet this same God said: “I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take

the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them” (Ezekiel 11:18-20).

What does the Lord command when He says: “Wash your heart from evil, O Jerusalem, that you may be saved” (Jeremiah 4:14a)? And again: “Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord” (Hosea 10:12)? Yet what does the psalmist ask of the Lord when he says: “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psalm 51:10)? And again when he prays: “Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Psalms 51:7)?

We see that in all these scriptures, both the grace of God and our freedom of will are affirmed. We see that a person, by his own efforts and activity, can nurture and act on a sincere desire for salvation and holiness, but he always needs to be helped by the Lord. For no one enjoys good health just because he eats and lives in healthy ways, nor is he freed from sickness at the command of his will. Therefore, the Lord’s brother says: “Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up” (James 5:14-15).

But to make it still more evident that out of a good nature – which has been bestowed on us by the kindness of our Creator – the beginnings of a good will [that is, godly desires] sometimes spring up, here is the witness of the Apostle, who says: “The will [to do good] is present in me, but the doing of the good [that is, carrying it out to its intended end] is not” (Romans 7:18b). And so we see from the words of Paul both the will to do good and the fact that we cannot attain to the perfection of holiness unless we are guided and assisted by the Lord.

Without question, the divine Scriptures verify the freedom of our will when it says: “Watch over your heart with all diligence” (Proverbs 4:23). But the Apostle lays bare the weakness of our will when he says: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). David proclaims the power of free will when he says: “I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes forever, even to the end” (Psalms 119:112). But he also teaches its weakness when he prays and says: “Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to dishonest gain” (Psalms 119:36). Solomon concurs with the weakness of our will when he says: “May the Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers; may He not leave us or forsake us, that He may incline our hearts to Himself, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances, which He commanded our fathers” (I Kings 8:57-58).

The psalmist refers to the power of our will when he says: “Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit” (Psalm 34:13). Our own prayer testifies to its weakness when we pray: “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3). The ability of our will is declared by the Lord when it is said: “Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose yourself from the chains around your neck, O captive daughter of Zion” (Isaiah 52:2). The prophet declares the frailty of our will when he says: “The

Lord sets the prisoners free” (Psalm 146:7). And again we read: “You have loosed my bonds. To You I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving” (Psalm 116:16-17).

We hear the Lord calling us in the Gospel to come to him by our free will, when he says: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). But the same Lord testifies to its weakness when he says: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). The Apostle refers to our free will when he says: “Run in such a way that you may win” (I Corinthians 9:24). But John the Baptist bears witness to its weakness when he says: “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven” (John 3:27). The Apostle writes to the Philippians and refers to their free will when he says: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). But in order to show its weakness he adds: “It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

These truths are mixed together and fused so indistinguishably, that that which is dependent on which is a great question as far as many people are concerned. Does God show mercy to us because we manifest the beginnings of a good will, or do we acquire the beginnings of a good will because God shows mercy? Or we might ask: “Whose doing is it? God’s or man’s?”

Many who hold to one of these alternatives as having more weight than the other have fallen into different self-contradictory errors. For if we said that the beginning of free will was up to us, what goodwill was there in Paul the persecutor and in Matthew the tax-collector? Paul was drawn to salvation while intent upon the blood and torment of Christians (Acts 9:1-6), and Matthew while intent upon the plunder of personal property (Matthew 9:9). But if we said that the beginnings of a good will were always inspired by the grace of God, what should we say about the faith of Zaccheus (Luke 19:2-10) and about the devotion of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:40-43)? By their own desire they forced their way into the heavenly kingdom (Matthew 11:12). Yet if we attribute the perfection of holy living and the carrying out of the commandments of God to our will alone, what do we say about Balaam, who was brought to curse Israel but was not permitted to curse when he wanted to (Numbers 22:5-24:25)? And in like manner we see that Abimelech was prevented from touching Rebekah and sinning against God (Genesis 20:6).

Joseph was sold into slavery because of his brothers’ envy. Yet God wanted an offspring of the children of Israel in Egypt and provisions for future famine made ready for those who plotted their brother's death. This same Joseph made this plain when he revealed himself to his brothers and said: “Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Genesis 45:5). And then he said: “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (Genesis 45:7-8).

And when his brothers were frightened, after the death of their father, that Joseph might avenge himself on them, he removed their anxious fear by saying: “Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to

bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Genesis 50:19-20). The blessed David affirms in the hundred and fifth psalm that God had acted providentially when he says: “And [God] called for a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread. He sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave” (Psalms 105:16-17).

Therefore, though these two things – the gracious empowerment and assistance of God on the one hand and the free will of man on the other – seem mutually opposed to one another, they are both in agreement. And since God presents both in His holy scriptures, can we do anything other than accept both as two sides of a single truth?

Indeed, it must not be believed that God made us in such a way that we have no will of our own or that we are incapable of doing any good. Consider this: we cannot claim that God has given us a free will if we say we can only exercise it in willing what is evil. And we cannot claim that we are capable of doing good if we say we are not capable of willing the good or carrying out the good ourselves. If we make such claims we must either ignore or contradict the words of the Lord which He spoke after the sin of Adam: “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:22).

Who of us would say that Adam was completely ignorant of what God said was good before eating the fruit from the tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil? Of course after his sin, Adam gained a knowledge of evil he had not had previously. On the other hand, to assume the knowledge of evil – brought into mankind by Adam’s sin – removed any knowledge of good, not only contradicts our Lord’s words, but also the words of the Apostle who clearly states: “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:14-16).

It is because we are capable of understanding the difference between good and evil that the Lord rebukes the willful blindness of the Jews, which they brought upon themselves by their own stubbornness. “Hear, you deaf! And look, you blind, that you may see. You have seen many things, but you do not observe them; your ears are open, but none hears” (Isaiah 42:18, 20). And so that no one would be able to attribute their blindness to nature and not to will, God says: “Bring out the people who are blind, even though they have eyes, and the deaf, even though they have ears” (Isaiah 43:8). The Lord also says in the Gospel: “While seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Matthew 13:13). Finally, in order to show that the possibility for good lay in them, He said when He rebuked the crowds that were listening to Him: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'A shower is coming,' and so it turns out. And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, 'It will be a hot day,' and it turns out that way. You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time? And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right” (Luke 12:54-57)? Jesus certainly would not have said this to them if he had not known that they could discern what was right by natural judgment.

Therefore, we must be on guard against attributing all the good works of Christians to the Lord in such a way that we ascribe nothing but what is bad and perverse to human nature. Those who hold such a view are refuted by the testimony of the most wise Solomon, or rather by that of the Lord, whose words Solomon spoke. For when the building of the Temple was finished, Solomon prayed and said: “Now it was in the heart of my father David to build a house for the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. But the Lord said to my father David, ‘Because it was in your heart to build a house for My name, you did well that it was in your heart. Nevertheless you shall not build the house, but your son who will be born to you, he will build the house for My name’” (I Kings 8:17-19). So here is the question: Was this desire in David’s heart good and from God, or bad and from man? If this heart-felt desire was good and was from God, why was its being brought to fulfillment denied by the very One who inspired it? Or if it was bad and was from man, why was it praised by the Lord? Our conclusion, then, is that we should believe it was both good and from man.

However, I need to make something very clear here. There is no room for human pride in acknowledging man’s part. David isn’t the first and you will not be the last to have good desires toward God. In fact, it is God in His kindness who has placed in every one of us the seeds of goodness. And unless they have been germinated by the help of God they will not be able to increase to godliness. The blessed Apostle makes this clear when he says, “So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth” (I Corinthians 3:7).

Therefore, there always remains in the human being a free will that can either neglect or love the grace of God. For the Apostle would not have commanded and said: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), if he had not known that such things could either be pursued or neglected by us. But to prevent us from thinking we can do this all on our own – that we do not need God’s help in working out our salvation – he adds: “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). We see this same single, yet seemingly two sided truth, when the Apostle urges the Christians in Corinth not to waste the grace of God in regard to their salvation. To them he said: “And working together with Him [God], we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain, for He [God] says, ‘At the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you’ ” (II Corinthians 6:1-2).

It is God who calls and invites us when He says: “All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people” (Romans 10:21). And yet we invite Him when we say: “I stretch out my hands to You; my soul longs for You, as a parched land [longs for water]” (Psalms 143:6; Psalm 88:9).

He waits for us, as so stated by the prophet: “Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you” (Isaiah 30:18). And we wait for Him when we say: “I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me and heard my cry” (Psalms 40:1). And the day will come when we will say: “Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation” (Isaiah 25:9).

We know He strengthens us, for He says: “Although I trained and strengthened their arms, yet they devise evil against Me” (Hosea 7:15). And He exhorts us to strengthen ourselves when He says: “Strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble” (Hebrews 12:12).

Jesus cries out for us to come to him when he says: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink” (John 7:37). The prophet also cries out, asking God to come to him when he says: “I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched; my eyes fail while I wait for my God” (Psalms 69:2-3).

And so we see that 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 his doing, 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. “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan said to God, “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. He 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 have no reason to utter his next claim 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 to His face 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 it a fair fight by preventing the raging enemy from driving Job mad and overcoming him in his weakened condition by an excessively wicked trial.

Moving to the New Testament Gospels, we are taught by the story of the centurion that the Lord occasionally tests our faith, so that it may become stronger and more steadfast. Surely the Lord already knew He was going to heal the centurion’s servant by the power of His word, yet he offered his bodily presence, saying: “I will come and heal him” (Matthew 8:7). But the

ardent fervor of the centurion's faith exceeded Christ's offer, and he said: "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). At this, Jesus marveled and said to those who were following: "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel" (Matthew 8:10). It would not have been praiseworthy or meritorious if Christ had pointed out in the centurion what He himself had given.

Returning to 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 it is 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, the Centurion, 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, which feeds self-pity and a readiness to accept failure. Now it is important to note 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. On the one hand, 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 trust in our own strength, but rather 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, 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 prove the truth of this scripture by further examples from the scripture.

By the voluntary condescension of his grace (i.e., Christ humbled himself to become as us and dealt with us as if we were like him), he 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, 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,” and all because of their unbelief (Mark 6:5-6). 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 he 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 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 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 – which is 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 not unsearchable 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 assistance. And then there is our repentance, our faith, our putting off the old self and putting on the new, 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 the first part of God’s grace is that each person be inflamed to desire what is good, yet in such a way that their free will can still choose between good and evil. Likewise, the second part of God’s grace is that the aforesaid 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 freedom to submit.

Thus it is that the God of the universe must be believed to work 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 everything is ascribed to free will on the other cannot be fully grasped by human intelligence and reason.