



Reformation Christian Ministries

Duty Versus Supererogation

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Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow [think] not. 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 17:9-10]

The Roman Catholic Church doctrine of the *works of supererogation* refers to actions believed to form a fund of merit that can be drawn on by prayer in favor of sinners. Put more simply, when you do more than what duty requires, you get special "points" that you can redeem in various ways. In secular parlance, it refers to *a class of actions that go beyond the call of duty*.

When it comes to thinking about missions, I fear that a vast majority of people view the subject as one somewhat of *supererogation*: something above and beyond the call of duty, **rather than mere duty**. In the illustration used by our Lord to His apostles in Luke 17, He makes the point that nothing within the commandments of God can possibly fall into the category of works above and beyond the call of duty, for all God's commands **are our duty**, including the command to *make disciples from all the nations*. And it is here very important to take note that these are ALL the nations, not just some of the nations, especially those centered in North America or countries in close proximity.

I wonder if serious mission work, and even the support of serious mission work, has been regarded with such a sentimental admiration, that it does not end up being inadvertently categorized mentally by many as **a work of supererogation rather than of duty**, and thus more easily dismissed. In the eyes of the Lord, it is however considered nothing more than duty, and not just for some, **but for all**.

To the average Christian, missions and missionary life has long been consigned to an undertaking of the most extraordinary magnitude, to such daring and devoted Christians of near apostolic capacities. And for some, the mystique and romance of missions is so great that the mere willingness to consider it elicits a heightened level of admiration, which, for some becomes their motive. But as young John Urquhart (1808-1827) once said, *...we should do well to view the matter apart from this borrowed splendour, which, by its glare obscures rather than brightens the object of our contemplation*.

Missions is for the church, thus for ordinary people. How much more ordinary can one be than those apostles called of the Lord—among whom we find fishermen, bureaucrats and carpenters. Plined by the Spirit of God, they became missionaries. As this matter of missions is considered by every Christian saved by the quintessential Missionary, the Lord Jesus Christ, it seems that it comes home in the form of duty—a duty for which every Christian is, in some way, responsible. The application of the duty may vary, but the duty obliges all. The duty of missions and the support of missions are not the fruit of some extraordinary faith that falls upon the lot of the extraordinary few of apostolic endowment, but is rather a test of simple discipleship itself.

We are told in Luke 14:26: ***If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple***. What qualifications do we find in this statement of the Lord which leaves one single Christian exempt? Do we rather not see this as a matter of our duty to the Lord who gave His all that we might have life eternal in service to Him? Has He not left us upon this earth to fulfill this duty, among others?

Each of us are responsible before the Lord for a part in the fulfilling of the church's great commission to make disciples from all the nations. We are not speaking here of sharing your faith with friends and neighbors, but having a vital part in missions to all nations. This means more than just putting a few dollars in the plate and believing you have now fulfilled your duty.

This young eighteen-year-old Urquhart went on to say to the St. Andrews Missionary Society in 1826 "If by these, and the remarks that follow, I can impress the mind of any one of you with the duty of engaging in this great undertaking, let me warn such an individual of the delusion of putting such convictions away from him on the ground that this is a work far too high for him to engage in; or under the deceitful impression that his shrinking from such an enterprise is a sign merely that his faith is weak, and has not yet acquired sufficient strength to warrant his engaging in a work of such difficulty and self-denial. If the words of Christ be true [quoted above Luke 12:46], *to shrink from duty, even in the face of all the trials that present themselves in the contemplation of the missionary life, does not argue a weakness of faith merely, but a want of faith. The man who is not ready to part with country and even life itself, at the bidding of his Saviour, is not worthy of the name of a disciple*."

As this is true of those God calls to consider missions as a career in one form or another, so also this must necessarily be true of those who remain at home. For those who go cannot do so but by the support of those who remain. How often is it the case that believers spend such an inordinate amount of their treasure on things totally unrelated to the things of Christ, and particularly missions? While we have earthly responsibilities to our families, and even local churches (which mere selfishness could encourage us to fulfill) we must also keep them in the context of the Lord's statement: ***If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple***.

Not everyone is up to works of supererogation, but every Christian is required to do his duty. And having done all our duty which we are commanded to the utmost, we remain but *unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do*. ***For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation is committed unto me*** (a duty). [1 Corinthians 9:16] Our willingness in doing our duty is then the basis of hearing from the Lord: *Well done, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities*. [Luke 19:17]

In contrast to what Christ's mission did for His people, our duty in missions is being faithful in but *very little*. However, that very little we must do to our utmost in reliance upon His Spirit for its fruit. Let us not think of missions as some work of supererogation, but rather as our commanded duty. Missions is not a work anymore than anything else Christ has commanded us to do. It is a duty. Let us be about our duty out of love for the One who loved us first.

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