

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF WORK AND REWARD

JOHANN HEINZ

Seminar Marienhöhe, Auf der Marienhöhe 32,
6100 Darmstadt, Federal Republic of Germany

Luther's unambiguous rejection of the doctrine of merit must not deceive us into thinking that the Reformer did not hold fast to the biblical sayings about reward. In modern research on Luther by both Protestant and Catholic scholars, his firm stance on this is unquestioned.¹

Respect for the biblical teaching of reward compelled him to maintain the concept of reward. To do this seemed to him all the easier because he saw in Paul's and John's emphasis on the "high doctrine of Christ" (*hoher artikel von Christo*)² the soteriological priority that gave the Synoptics the right to emphasize work and reward.³ For him, Paul and Matthew stand in the unity of the faith which announces itself in works, although Luther also conceded that the emphasis of his opponents on works ("Behold works, works" [*Ecce opera, opera*], should not be taken lightly.⁴

For Luther, it was important that from *praemium* ("reward") we should not conclude a *meritum* ("earning," "merit"),⁵ for

¹Cf. Walther von Loewenich, *Luther als Ausleger der Synoptiker* (Munich, 1954), p. 193; Rudolf Hermann, *Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen, 1967), pp. 151-152; Albrecht Peters, *Glaube und Werk* (Berlin, 1962), pp. 186-207; Otto Hermann Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz, 1967), p. 321; and August Hasler, *Luther in der katholischen Dogmatik* (Munich, 1968), p. 232.

²*Luthers Werke*, Weimar Ausgabe, 32: 352.37. References to the primary sources will be exclusively from this basic edition, hereinafter cited as *WA* (or as *WA-TR* for the "Tischreden" volumes, and *WA-DB* for the "Deutsche Bibel" volumes). Normally, I will indicate not only the volume (including "part" and "section," where applicable) and page citation, but also the exact line or lines on the page.

³*WA* 32: 352.33-353.6.

⁴*WA* 38: 645.24-27.

⁵*WA* 39/1: 306.14-16.

anyone who wishes to earn will be lost.⁶ The person who serves for the sake of earning a reward has not surrendered completely to God. The one who receives the reward of grace attributes everything to God. This latter sort of individual serves God spontaneously, and all the rest comes about as a result.⁷

Merit, says Luther, implies a morality of reward and a spiritual thinking in class structures ("should not a Carthusian earn more . . . than . . . a housewife?").⁸ However, the biblical reward implies that the work is done for God's sake and is an illustration of the promise of God, which the believer now possesses by faith and will later possess by sight.⁹ Nevertheless, in conjunction with this general reward of grace, which consists of the gift of eternal life and is distributed to all in a similar way, Luther also sees a charismatic reward which will distinguish Paul, Peter, and the martyrs from the mass of other believers.¹⁰ This greater reward is derived from the greater gifts which were given to the Apostles and the martyrs,¹¹ gifts which "without any cooperation and thought" (*on alle zuthun und gedancken*)¹² come from God and therefore do not provide a basis for any merit.

Within the framework of these fundamental theological concepts, Luther's exegesis was concerned with all the texts that his opponents offered for establishing the thought of merit (texts, incidentally, still used for the same purpose). These texts will be discussed under the following broad categories: (1) those that seem to show a final relationship between works and reward (e.g., texts that encourage works in view of ultimate rewards); (2) those which in some sense appear to make a correspondence of work and reward (e.g., Luke 6:38: "The measure you give will be the measure you receive back"); (3) those which express an imperative to do good works (e.g., Matt 19:17, Jesus' command to the rich young ruler to

⁶WA 7: 801.2-13; 18: 694.15-17.

⁷WA 10/3: 280.8-14.

⁸WA 7: 559.24; and 32: 522.26-27—"Solt ein Catheuser nicht mehr verdienen . . . den . . . eine ehfraw?"

⁹WA 7: 559.18-23; 2: 98.34-40.

¹⁰WA 36: 652.15-18; 653.24-27.

¹¹WA 36: 513.35.

¹²WA 36: 516.32.

keep the commandments); (4) NT passages which deal with "judgment according to works" and the "faith"/"works" relationship as treated in the Epistle of James; (5) NT passages that ascribe to "love" (along with "faith" and even above "faith") a justifying or even meritorious value; and (6) several other texts that specify or imply a reward for service or obedience.

1. *Texts on Works and Final Reward*

Texts which seem to show a final relationship of works and reward include the following:

Matt 5:11-12 — "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you . . . for great is your reward in heaven."

Matt 6:1-4 — Alms are to be in secret, "and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you openly."

Matt 6:14-15 — "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, your Father will not forgive your trespasses."

Matt 19:27-30 — Peter queries, "What, then, shall we have?" (after stating, "We have left all and followed you"). Jesus responds by referring to final rewards, adding that "many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

1 Cor 9:24 — Counsel is given to so run the race as to obtain the prize.

1 Cor 15:58 — Exhortation to "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

Since the idea of one's own goal-directed accomplishment for the attainment of an appropriate reward lies at the root of the final ethical principle, could not one read the concept of merit into such texts?

Luther thinks not. He knows that the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) is addressed to Christ's disciples¹³ and therefore pertains

¹³WA 32: 543.34.

to the lived faith. But the lived faith presupposes the received salvation. The believer does not need to earn anything more, but he probably needs the encouragement and comfort of knowing that God rewards—even undeservedly.¹⁴

The Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12) doubtless emphasize “doing.” But from where and how this “doing” comes into being, the Evangelist Matthew says in another place. Nevertheless, the first Beatitude already indicates that all works presuppose the right, believing mind.¹⁵ But this—the work in faith—is God’s working; therefore it does not belong to man, but to God.¹⁶

Again and again, Luther emphasizes that work is a witness to faith—that faith makes one religious, and that works demonstrate this.¹⁷ Faith is the commander in the process; work is the witness. The work does not really need to be commanded, as such, at all; it occurs by itself with the Christian. It is exactly thus that reward is simply the consequence of the work.¹⁸

If reward is proclaimed in the gospel, Luther further points out, it is not that it may be sought and earned, but that it may be recognized.¹⁹ Reward functions, not to build salvation, but to enjoy the promise. Therefore, one should not confuse promise and merit.²⁰ Even if heaven were to be earned by lifting up a straw, Luther would nevertheless not do it, for that would revile the honor of God.²¹ Even with complete obedience of grace, God’s mercy must be called upon, because God so wishes it.²² Thus, Luther rejects not only the doctrine of merit of Scholasticism, but also the teaching of the final way of salvation by Augustine.²³

¹⁴WA 32: 339.34-35; 340.17-19; 543.1-4. See also 10/3: 401.17-18.

¹⁵WA 38: 459.9-11, 16-19.

¹⁶WA 10/3: 286.9-10.

¹⁷WA 10/3: 286.20-287.6.

¹⁸WA 10/3: 297.9-11; 289.14-32; 401.19-20.

¹⁹WA 10/3: 289.28.

²⁰WA 32: 543.28-32 (lines 30-32: “Da mustu mir nicht ein gemenge machen und die zwey unter einander brewen”).

²¹WA 10/3: 280.10-14.

²²WA-TR 1: 32.19-30.

²³Ibid.

Apparently only the Synoptics speak of works-righteousness, says Luther; but in reality they—especially Luke—speak of the *sola fide* which is a *sola fide numquam sola*. John and James agree with this also. The emphasis on works then, as well as now, must be given because even the faithful are always in danger of neglecting obedience.²⁴ In this, there can be no talk of merits in any case. The thought of merit is rejected in the Scriptures. There is neither a *meritum de congruo* for justification, nor a *meritum de condigno* for salvation.²⁵

Jesus' polemic against the Pharisees (Matt 6:1-4) gives Luther occasion to emphasize the difference between human-merit morality and divine-reward morality. Both have works as the goal,²⁶ but merit morality (*der schendliche Tück*) seeks its own honor, while the biblical reward-ethic does all for God's sake—not to attain merit, but in the same way as God also gives gifts daily whether one thanks Him for them or not.²⁷ This the world cannot learn; only as one becomes a Christian can it be learned.²⁸ To the one who seeks no reward and who wishes only to please God will the reward freely come, for God has thus promised and he does not lie.²⁹

Where the forgiveness of man seems to be a precondition for God's forgiveness (Matt 6:14-15), Luther emphasizes that this is only apparently so, for one must distinguish between inner and outer forgiveness.³⁰ Through the gospel and word of God, man receives forgiveness first in his heart through faith. This is God's work alone and can be compared with the trunk or roots of a tree. Only then is the person capable of forgiving. This is the fruit; or as 2 Pet 1:10 puts it, works are to confirm the call and election that has already occurred. This is the proper assurance (*certificatio*) of faith. The one who experiences it knows that this does not spring

²⁴WA 10/3: 293.3-16.

²⁵WA 32: 538.11-14; 539.33-39.

²⁶WA 32: 408.30.

²⁷WA 32: 408.12-15; 409.8-10,16; 411.1-8.

²⁸WA 32: 408.40-409.1; 410.30-31.

²⁹WA 32: 410.20; 413.6-8.

³⁰WA 32: 422.30-32; and 423.15-424.1.

from his own nature but from the grace of God.³¹

Sophists are those who believe that one may earn merits through works. The Christian looks, however, to words such as in Matt 6:14-15, to God's word and promise with the eye of faith. Hence the works that follow become a "sign" (*warzeichen*) that God is gracious.³² Forgiveness of one's neighbor doubtless becomes a condition. However, it is not a final condition, but rather a *consecutively set-up condition*—one which does not strive for salvation, but rather witnesses to salvation. Otherwise, faith would not be genuine.³³

Peter's question, "What, then, shall we have?" (Matt 19:27), gives Luther the occasion to go into the problem of the general and the charismatic reward. A person is redeemed only through faith, but receives the charismatic reward according to works. As now a pastor can stand before a congregation because of the special gift lent to him (*suo dono*), so also there will be differences in the resurrection of the dead.³⁴ But the general reward is totally a reward of grace, for the first will be last and the last first. This is the main point (*heubstuck*) of the whole matter.

Peter's assertion that the disciples had left everything shows that it is only a matter of the work of the Holy Spirit, Luther points out, for no one of himself is capable of it. "Widderteuffer" and "Parfuser Munche" ("Anabaptists" and "discalced friars") act from their own initiative. Thereby they behave as proudly as Diogenes, the saint of the devil, who paraded his poverty.³⁵

Theologians divide grace and merit, says Luther; they act according to the principle that "when you have accomplished this, I will be your debtor" (*Si feceris, tum tibi debitor ero*).³⁶ God

³¹WA 32: 424.1-4.

³²WA 32: 424.17-25.

³³WA 15: 484.14-18.

³⁴WA 30/2: 668.11-15. At first sight, this seems to contradict another statement, where Luther asserts that *coram Deo* Paul would not stand higher than the rest of the saved (WA 15: 425.8). But apparently by this he means concerning the kingdom of God, which is alike for all because Christ is alike for all (*ibid.*, lines 3-4).

³⁵WA 47: 358.12-16; 359.9; 360.9-27.

³⁶WA 15: 424.24.

rewards according to grace. One who recognizes him as King of mercy is spontaneously given gifts a hundredfold.³⁷

Luther responds in a similar way to the Pauline texts that were in like manner put forward as final-meritorious. The challenge to run and to obtain the prize (1 Cor 9:24) does not say anything about *how* this is to happen. Can one conclude from the sentence, "If the Emperor defeats the Turks he will be lord of Syria," that he consequently can both do it and does do so?³⁸ Only through faith in Christ is it possible to obtain the crown; everything else is in vain, even if the person sweats blood.³⁹ The works of faith, however, please God; and this in itself would be a comfort, even if nothing more followed. But more does follow, because God promised the reward of grace, which reward the believer can expect. It is thus that Luther interprets 1 Cor 15:58.⁴⁰

2. *Texts Suggesting Correspondence of Work and Reward*

Even more challenging to Luther than the foregoing category of texts must have been the texts that are seen by some in the sense of a correspondence of work and reward, such as:

Matt 5:7 — "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Matt 7:1-2 and Luke 6:38 — "... The measure you give will be the measure that you receive back."

Matt 10:41 — The person who receives a prophet "will receive a prophet's reward."

Luther did not allow himself to be irritated by these texts, but he could not find in them the thought of merit.⁴¹ From his theological viewpoint this is understandable, for there cannot be any correspondence if reward is promise, consequence, and result,

³⁷WA 15: 424.17-19.

³⁸WA 18: 693.21-26.

³⁹WA 34/1: 158.12-13; 159.4-5.

⁴⁰WA 18: 695.12-17.

⁴¹"Ego non lego neque invenio in hoc Euangelio, quod aliquid mereamur operibus" (WA 27: 245.9-10).

rather than resting upon worthiness.⁴² Promise, furthermore, can never be coupled with claim and correspondence, for it goes far beyond all human thought of right and measure.⁴³ God himself is indeed the promise!

What, then, do the gospel sayings about work and reward mean? First, the promise should operate similarly to the law. The law commands and at the same time proves one's incapability, for no one can fulfill it. Likewise, the promise encourages and, at the same time, shows that the person can do nothing to attain it.⁴⁴

Second, one must distinguish between command (*praeceptum*) and promise (*promissio*). In the case of a command, the person only produces his indebtedness. Like the servant in Luke 17:10, he has no claim on the reward. He must simply do as he is commanded. It is different with the promise. God out of mercy adds it to the account of what the person owes.⁴⁵ Out of this, therefore, no accounting can arise.⁴⁶

Third, one could, because of the gift-character of the "reward," speak at most of a paradoxical correspondence.⁴⁷ The one who stands before God like a beggar stands simultaneously there like a rich man. For the one who boasts of his possessions loses all, but the one who comes with empty hands receives an unspeakably rich gift. Again and again, as Luther emphasizes, the person stands before God with faith, while works apply to the neighbor.⁴⁸ Thus, from the beginning there can be no correspondence between works and reward. Works stand, as Luther stressed repeatedly to his hearers, in consecutive relationship to faith. They are proof of faith (*preysung, bewerbung, zaychen, sigel, volgen, fruecht, beweynung*).⁴⁹

⁴²WA 18: 693.38-39; 694.37-38.

⁴³"Wohl euch die jr barmhertzig seid, denn jr werdet widder eitel barmhertzigkeit finden beide hie und dort, und solche barmhertzigkeit, die alle menschliche wolthat und barmhertzigkeit unausprechlich weit ubertrifft" (WA 32: 323.10-12).

⁴⁴WA 18: 695.2-11.

⁴⁵"Uber das quod debemus, addit promissionem quae non fit ex merito, sed ex misericordia" (WA 27: 246.6-7).

⁴⁶"Si illa [merita] respiceret, wurde er yn ein rechnung treten" (WA 27: 246.14-15).

⁴⁷WA 32: 479.8.

⁴⁸WA 10/1 sect. 2: 314.11-13; 10/3: 222.24-223.8.

⁴⁹WA 10/3: 225.18-226.8 (cf. also 226.22-23); 10/1 sect. 2: 318.15-23.

Fourth, Luther sees in Matt 5:7 and Luke 6:31-38 what are simply examples of the "Golden Rule" in the relationship between persons.⁵⁰ There are "spiritual sayings" (*etliche sprüche führen den geist*), which deal with faith and the freely given salvation; and there are "bodily sayings" (*die den leib führen*), which deal with works and the responsibility toward the neighbor. The words of Jesus—"Forgive, and so you will be forgiven"; "Give, and thus it will be given to you;" and "With the measure with which you measure, it will be measured to you"—belong in the second group and have reference within the world.⁵¹

The word about "a prophet's reward" (Matt 10:41) Luther calls a Hebraism. It really has reference only to a received gift. As the preacher can be considered to be Christ because he preaches the word of Christ—without there really being a correspondence between Christ and preacher—, so it is with the reward, since it is reward only in a symbolic sense.⁵² The content of the reward during the present is the wisdom of the prophet, which is given by the Spirit; in eternity it will be the everlasting life that God gives. The charismatic reward will be different, for the prophet is a teacher and we are his pupils.⁵³

3. *Texts Expressing an Imperative to Do Good Works*

Since Luther's way of interpreting the Scriptures can be called "biblicism," certain texts must have been especially challenging to him—texts expressing an imperative to do good works and which at first glance would seem to be like erratic blocks in his doctrine of reward. Among such texts are the following:

Dan 4:24-27 — Decree of God's punishment upon Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and an appeal to Nebuchadnezzar to "break off your sins by practicing righteousness . . . , that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your tranquility."

Matt 6:20 — "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

⁵⁰WA 10/1 sect. 2: 323.12-28.

⁵¹WA 10/1 sect. 2: 319.1-19; 323.18-23.

⁵²WA 38: 515.8-10.

⁵³WA 48: 113.4-7, 11-16.

Matt 19:17 — “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.”

Luke 16:9 — “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that . . . they may receive you into the eternal habitations.”

Dan 4:24-27 is a passage of Scripture with which Luther strove repeatedly, both as young and as old Reformer, and to which he devoted a disputation in 1535. He expresses the idea that either unbelief or faith precedes all words about sin and good works.⁵⁴ Therefore, in order to be able to give alms, the person's heart must first become pure.⁵⁵ This occurs through Christ and faith.⁵⁶ The giving of alms, through which Nebuchadnezzar was to produce righteousness, means the same as the *fides incarnata*;⁵⁷ namely, the faith that makes righteous because it stands the test by good works *coram hominibus*.⁵⁸

The imperative to the deed is not moral; rather, it is theological. That is, it does not automatically apply to the powers of the person; but on the contrary, it applies to faith.⁵⁹

How, though, could Nebuchadnezzar have had faith? Luther says that Nebuchadnezzar had had Daniel as preacher of the true God and could take for himself the salvation in Christ proleptically, as all people in the time of the OT could do.⁶⁰ But since the king did not believe, and therefore did not act accordingly, he was punished for his unbelief.⁶¹ Most important of all for the Reformer was the fact that the *fides incarnata* (life-righteousness as consequence) is not to be played out against the *sola fide* (faith-righteousness as ground).⁶²

⁵⁴WA 30/2: 663.3-6; 39/1: 64.7 and 65.5.

⁵⁵WA 12: 647.3-7.

⁵⁶WA 39/1: 47.11-12.

⁵⁷WA 39/1: 65.6-7.

⁵⁸WA 12: 647.2-3; 10/1 sect. 2: 44.21-23; 30/2: 662.24-26.

⁵⁹WA 40/1: 457.19-23.

⁶⁰WA 39/1: 65.18-19, and 64.3-4.

⁶¹WA 30/2: 663.1-3.

⁶²WA 39/1: 65.26-28.

Such considerations concerning the theological imperative lead us also to Luther's interpretation for the NT texts noted above. For him, the imperative indicated in them is likewise not moral, but theological.

Concerning Matt 6:20, Luther thinks that the imperative really would not be necessary, because genuine faith always fulfills the will of God. Jesus here is not emphasizing the search for merit and reward; he is warning against greed. It is a call to trust in God alone, for no one can serve two masters.⁶³ The reference to the "invisible treasure" (*der unsichtige Schatz*)⁶⁴ does not mean final meritorious accomplishments, but total surrender to God. Jesus wishes to warn against temptations that could destroy faith.⁶⁵

In any case, for Luther it would be a grave misunderstanding if one wished to speak of works and reward *coram Deo* in "human terms" (*menschlicher weysse*),⁶⁶ for with God faith and reward do not follow work. In fact, it is just the opposite: the works follow faith, and living faith has the reward as consequence—"without any seeking for it" (*on alles suchen*).⁶⁷

The passage in Matt 19:17 occupied Luther's attention frequently, for on the basis of that text the pope asserted that it is not faith but works that count before God. This "dark saying" (*finsterer Spruch*), said Luther, can be illuminated by many lucid sayings, all of which emphasize the keeping of the commandments as a consequence of salvation, and not as the cause of salvation. For "must" ("You must keep the commandments") does not mean "can" or "be able to" ("You are able to keep the commandments").⁶⁸ The Scripture always is to be understood from Christ (*pro Christo intelligenda*). "From Christ" means "from faith in Christ" (*in fide Christi*).⁶⁹ That also means that merits have to be diminished, even

⁶³WA 10/3: 289.15-16; 32: 437.12-13; 38: 462.39-463.18.

⁶⁴WA 32: 443.8.

⁶⁵WA 32: 443.9-12; 437.7-8.

⁶⁶WA 10/3: 289.7-10.

⁶⁷WA 10/3: 289.18-22.

⁶⁸WA 47: 341.39-342.3; 342.26-32; 343.15-35.

⁶⁹WA 39/1: 47.3,6; 40/1: 415.18-24.

annihilated. In grace, all people are alike; only in merits = gifts are they different.⁷⁰

Luther attempted to grasp Luke 16:9 in the most systematic way. He felt that in this text we must deal with three questions: (1) Does our relationship with God depend on *works*? (2) Should we perform works for *our* salvation? (3) Are the “friends” who receive us the Catholic *saints*?⁷¹

The first question he answers thus: It is not our works but our faith that makes us friends of God.⁷² Only because the Scholastics always understand faith as the *fides informis* are we even tempted to mingle works with the question of salvation. If people had held fast to fiducial faith, the work question would not have come up at all, for works follow true faith just as fruits are brought forth on a tree. In the gospel we are made aware of works only so that we may know what correct faith is. Only faith makes pious (i.e., religious); works merely demonstrate the piety.⁷³ Faith first makes righteous “inside the spirit” (*inwendig im geyst*); but works, “outwardly” (*eusserlich und offentlich*).⁷⁴

From this, the second question also is solved for Luther: It is a self-evident corollary that works must take place selflessly and freely. Concerning this, he points to Matt 10:8 (“You received without pay, give without pay”). Besides the usual argument—namely, that works serve one’s neighbor—, the thought is implicit here that works must be done to honor God (*Gott tzu ehren*).⁷⁵

This *Deo soli gloria* then solves the third question: The saints cannot do anything for us. As sinners, they themselves need God.⁷⁶ Luther sees the “friends” in the parable, not in heaven, but on earth. They are the poor who must be helped. The “receiving” is a portrayal of the way that some day they will bear witness before

⁷⁰WA-TR 2: 450.16-18.

⁷¹WA 10/3: 283.22-29, and cf. lines 12-13.

⁷²WA 10/3: 283.30-284.8.

⁷³WA 10/3: 285.3-286.4, 20-32.

⁷⁴WA 10/3: 286.26-28.

⁷⁵WA 10/3: 288.16-17, 23.

⁷⁶WA 10/3: 290.10-12.

God to our faith; however, basically it is not they, but God, who receives.⁷⁷

4. *NT Texts on "Judgment According to Works" and the Faith/Works Relationship*

Luther, of course, puzzled over the relation between works and reward while interpreting passages in the NT which refer to a "judgment according to works"; and he found it necessary, too, to discuss the relationship of "faith" and "works" as set forth in the Epistle of James. We shall notice here Luther's treatment of the following two passages:

Matt 16:27 — At the Son of man's coming he will "reward everyone according to his works."

Jas 2:14-26 — Faith is evidenced by works. E.g., "What does it profit . . . if a man says he has faith but does not have works? (vs. 14); ". . . I will show you my faith by my works" (vs. 18); "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead" (vs. 26).

Reward According to Works (Matt 16:27)

Luther devoted himself to the problem of "judgment according to works" most specifically in connection with his explanation of Matt 16, but indicated his position concerning this question also in dealing with such texts as Matt 25:31-40, Rom 2:6, 1 Pet 1:17, and Heb 6:10.

Luther's treatment of this subject was not an attempt to battle against the concept of works and reward, but was rather a polemic against the theology of a humanly earned justification. Indeed, he felt that there must be a judgment according to works, simply because there is no righteousness in the world. If there were righteousness, he pointed out, then John Huss would not have been executed.⁷⁸

Every worldly judgment is, accordingly, concerned with violations of the commandments from the Second Table of the Law.

⁷⁷WA 10/3: 288.19-27; 290.28-31.

⁷⁸WA 30/2: 670.29-30; 38: 644.30-35 and 645.8-16.

Such a judgment is, therefore, *a priori* only an impoverished one (*Es ist ein bettlerisch gericht und nicht das a, b, c vom gericht Gottes*).⁷⁹

But to conclude something from Matt 16 concerning justification is false, says Luther, for that text does not concern justification, but judgment. It does not ask *how* a person *becomes* righteous, but *whether* a person *is* righteous. The Scripture contains a double aspect: promise and law. Gift corresponds to the first, and work to the second.⁸⁰

Indeed, the works that are done must not be isolated from the person who does them. Before works occur, they are decided in the heart, spirit, will, and understanding. That is to say, the *righteous person* is to be set ahead of the *righteous act*. Concerning this, there is agreement among philosophers and theologians. The difference lies only in that the philosopher thinks in the category of reason-work, while the theologian thinks in the category of faith-works.⁸¹

The "being righteous" occurs through faith alone (*sola fide*). The "being found righteous" occurs through the work of faith.⁸² Faith and work belong together and should not be separated; both form the inseparable sum of being a Christian (*summa des gantzen Christlichen lebens*).⁸³

Once again, Luther emphasizes that the work of faith must not be separated from the person. It is not the works that are judged, but the person who is judged according to the works. The works receive no reward, but the individual who performs the works does (*Quare non opera, sed operans recipiet mercedem*).⁸⁴ Therefore, in the judgment, it is a question of the *root* of the right action—that is, of the *person* changed by faith—not simply a matter of the action itself (*credulitas, not operatio*).⁸⁵

⁷⁹WA 38: 645.1-7.

⁸⁰WA 38: 645.17-22, 32-35.

⁸¹WA 38: 646.8-39.

⁸²WA 38: 647.9-10; 648.21-28.

⁸³WA 38: 647.24-32; 12: 289.23-290.11, 32-33.

⁸⁴WA 12: 647.32-35.

⁸⁵WA 57/1: 23.12-13.

Luther wishes hereby to secure the consecutive aspect of salvation in contrast to the final way of salvation. For faith, the recipient can only be thankful and grateful; on the other hand, with works there is always the danger of self-assertion. Thus, it is clear that Paul, like every other Christian, will be saved only by grace (though nevertheless, independent of the question of salvation, a greater charismatic reward awaits him).⁸⁶

The Relationship of "Faith" and "Works" (Jas 2:14-26)

Luther's exegesis of Jas 2:14-26 mirrors the strained relationship between the Reformer and the Epistle of James which he referred to as "a strawy epistle" and "a papist epistle."⁸⁷ Several different kinds of observations about this epistle's faith/works relationship are found in Luther's writings. Moreover, in an interesting way these run parallel in time.

In his preface to James and Jude in 1522, Luther indeed affirms that James' letter is to be praised for its stress on the law, but that it stands in contradiction to Paul because it ascribes justification to works.⁸⁸ In the sermons from the same year, however, he harmonizes Paul and James in that he has the latter speak of "dead" faith and "living" faith, wherein the living faith is shown by works. James treats these works only in the context of *post justificationem*.⁸⁹

The recorded "table conversations" add some perspectives, too. In one that is dated 1533, Luther explains forcefully that Paul and James cannot be harmonized even if many interpreters, including Melancthon, have endeavored to do so with "perspiration."⁹⁰ Luther held fast to this view to the end of his life. In fact, in 1542 he repeated the assertion made in 1522, to the effect that the Epistle is not apostolic and does not speak of Christ. It came, Luther

⁸⁶WA 30/2: 670.27-29.

⁸⁷WA-DB 6: 10.33-34; WA-TR 5: 414.7—"Strohern Epistel," "Papisten Epistel."

⁸⁸WA-DB 7: 384.3-6,9-10.

⁸⁹WA 10/3: 288.3-6; 293.10-11.

⁹⁰WA-TR 3: 253.25-29 (in no. 3292a)—"Wer die zusammen reymen kan, dem wil ich mein pirreth auffsetzen und wil mich yhn einen narren lassen schelten." Cf. WA-TR 5: 414.4.

observed, from a Jew who held the teaching of the law in contrast to the Christian teaching of faith.⁹¹

Over against this sort of explanation stands a table conversation of 1533 wherein Luther explains that James is right if one takes his word as referring to the external behavior according to the Ten Commandments. Apparently, Luther here means the *iustitia civilis*, for just prior to this he had praised the external discipline and training of the "Waldenses," and had reproached them only because they knew no *sola fide* in justification. It is only if the position of James is drawn into the question of justification that it contradicts God and the Holy Scriptures.⁹²

5. *NT Texts that Ascribe to "Love" a Justifying or Meritorious Value*

From the *sola fide* principle it was also unavoidable that Luther had to face the NT passages which ascribe to love, along with faith and even above faith, justifying or even meritorious value. Luther was all the more unable to avoid this question because of the fact that his opponents again and again boasted of these texts, especially 1 Cor 13.⁹³ The main Scripture passages treated by Luther in this category may be listed as follows:

Luke 7:47 — "... her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. . . ."

1 Cor 13:1-2,13 — "... If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." "So these three abide—faith, hope, love—; but the greatest of these is love."

Gal 5:6 — "... faith which works through love."

1 Pet 4:8 — "Above all, have unfailing love for one another, for love covers over a multitude of sins."

⁹¹*WA-TR* 5: 157.17-23 (no. 5443).

⁹²*WA-TR* 3: 38.9-18 (no. 2864b).

⁹³"Bei dem gemeinen Man ist ein abenteuerlich Epistel, weyls seltzam wort sind, preiset auch die lieb ubern glauben und hofnung, setzt auch, es sey alles nichts, was nicht lieb ist, sind scharffe word, Papisten schliessen hiraus, Der glaub mache nicht selig" (*WA* 49: 351.23-26).

1 John 4:17 — “Love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment.”

In the year 1535 Luther devoted a special disputation to Luke 7:47. For him the exegetical key to the whole section is in vs. 50, which indicates that it was not love but faith that helped the woman before God. Christ did not say to her, “Faith and love [*fides caritate formata*] have saved you.” He said, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Luther points out, further, the fact that in speaking to the woman, Jesus mentions only her faith and is silent concerning works (vs. 50), whereas in speaking to Simon the Pharisee, he calls attention to the woman’s works and is silent about her faith (vss. 44-47). Jesus did this because the Pharisees looked upon the woman as a public sinner and Jesus could thus rehabilitate her. She saw herself, however, as a sinner before God and was justified by her faith.⁹⁴

Thus, the whole pericope is a commentary on the *sola fide numquam sola*—that is, on the faith that alone redeems, but which does not remain alone through the fact that it reveals itself in love.⁹⁵ Every merit is thereby excluded, for in Rom 4 Paul distinguishes between the “imputed gift” (*donum imputatum*) and the “merited reward” (*merces merita*).⁹⁶

Luther’s views concerning the famous Corinthian passage (1 Cor 13:1-13) have been treated in detail by Paul Althaus,⁹⁷ so that it suffices here simply to summarize his comments briefly. Luther struggled with this passage throughout his lifetime. Until the 1530s he interpreted the pericope in different ways, and only toward the end of his life did he break through to a single interpretation.⁹⁸ According to Althaus, the fluctuations are a sign of the difficulties that the Reformer found here.⁹⁹

⁹⁴WA 39/1: 128.5-129.8; 130.33-35; 131.5-6.

⁹⁵WA 39/1: 129.9-11, 19-20; 131.41-42.

⁹⁶WA 39/1: 130.5-8.

⁹⁷Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, 4th ed. (Gütersloh, 1975), pp. 357-371.

⁹⁸Ibid., pp. 357-358.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 372.

It is possible to distinguish four explanations of 1 Cor 13 in Luther:¹⁰⁰ (1) The faith of which Paul speaks is not the special faith in Christ but the general faith in God—which even the pagans possess. Such a faith can also work miracles. Luther finds proof for this in Judas. Paul cannot have meant the Christian faith, because that always draws love after it. (2) On the other hand, if one wishes to understand faith here as the Christian faith, then it is a decadent faith which, out of pride in its own power to work miracles, lets love be absent. (3) However, one could also understand that Paul is in a way speaking of unreality (*unmögliches Exempel*). That is, in order to emphasize the indispensability of love, Paul sets forth an impossible example. The impossibility consists of the fact that faith cannot really exist without love. The discussion, though, is only theoretical and has a purely didactic character. (4) At a later time, Luther allowed room for the thought that in 1 Cor 13 the faith mentioned should be understood as the charismatic gift referred to in the context (1 Cor 12); thus, the reference would not be to the salvation-faith at all.

Whereas in 1525 Luther recommended the third interpretation,¹⁰¹ at the end of his life he had swung around to the first interpretation.¹⁰² According to Althaus, Luther would have come closest to Paul with the second interpretation.¹⁰³ Modern exegesis, on the other hand, opts generally for the fourth interpretation.¹⁰⁴

Luther's treatment of Gal 5:6 is quite different. Between the young and the old Reformer there is here a consistency in viewpoint. Luther was completely sure that his opponents falsely interpreted the passage, for this passage does not speak of becoming righteous (justification), but of the life of the righteous person

¹⁰⁰For the first three, see *WA* 17/2: 164.27,34-36; 165.6-20. For the fourth one, see *WA* 39/1: 77.3; 39/2: 236.8-9.

¹⁰¹*WA* 17/2: 165.14.

¹⁰²*WA* 39/2: 310.13-20.

¹⁰³Althaus, p. 371.

¹⁰⁴Cf., e.g., Hans Lietzmann, *An die Korinther I-II*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament, 5th ed. (Tübingen, 1969), p. 61; Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC, 2d ed. (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 266; and Frederik W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1953), p. 286.

(sanctification).¹⁰⁵ When it is a question of becoming righteous, Paul speaks in Rom 3:11 of a verdict without works and merit.¹⁰⁶ The faith that is effective through love is not the theoretical faith (*fides ficta*),¹⁰⁷ which for its practical completion needs love as an enlivening element and so becomes *fides formata*.¹⁰⁸ The faith of which Paul speaks in Gal 5:6 is the living faith, the *fides efficax*—as Erasmus also refers to it in the original. This faith must be called the genuine faith (*fides vera et vivax*).¹⁰⁹ It already has salvation, hence its activity through love has neither a final nor meritorious character. Indeed, Paul defines this faith, not as one that justifies through love (*iustificat, gratum facit*), but as one that works through love (*operatur*).¹¹⁰ As a gift of love from God it has come into being, and as a love-gift to fellowmen it extends itself further.

Luther is also concerned with the reference to fellowmen in 1 Pet 4:8. The love that covers sins is no activity of “satisfaction” in the subjective process of salvation, but is the reconciliation which ends the quarrel with fellowmen. Before God, only faith covers.¹¹¹ However, in forgiving one’s neighbor, a person bears witness to standing in God’s forgiveness. Faith blots out the sin from God’s consciousness; love blots it out from man’s consciousness.¹¹²

According to 1 John 4:17, the Christian can find peace because his love will be remembered in the day of judgment. Luther struggled for some time with this text, as he had with the passage in 1 Cor 13, because he foresaw in it difficulties for his belief in the assurance of salvation. Since Althaus has thoroughly canvassed this problem, we need here only to summarize his conclusions.¹¹³

At first, Luther advocated the interpretation that the love referred to in 1 John 4:17 is not at all a matter of love of the person

¹⁰⁵WA-BR 9: 407.40-41.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., lines 35-37.

¹⁰⁷WA 40/2: 37.13.

¹⁰⁸WA 40/2: 34.17-20.

¹⁰⁹WA 2: 567.19-23; 40/2: 37.14.

¹¹⁰WA 40/2: 35.21-24.

¹¹¹WA 12: 377.27-378.10.

¹¹²WA 10/1 sect. 2: 44.18-28; 45.15-16.

¹¹³Althaus, pp. 372-385.

but that rather it pertains to the love of God.¹¹⁴ In other words, because God loves, we need have no anxiety before God's judgment.

Later, Luther gave up this explanation and—according to the context (vs. 18) and with the majority of interpreters—he referred this love to the love of the Christian, which is revealed through the keeping of the Ten Commandments. Here he naturally had to ask the question: How is such an activity to be united with the assurance of salvation of the *sola fide*?

Working out from his basic theological view, Luther handled this matter in a way similar to that in which he dealt with the judgment according to works. The love of which John speaks is the fruit of faith.¹¹⁵ Through it, faith is made firm¹¹⁶ and exercised.¹¹⁷ Thereby love manifests the genuineness of faith itself, the assurance of its genuineness.¹¹⁸ The "perfect love" is thus, for Luther, not the complete love (for it always stands in tension with concupiscence), but is the genuine love.¹¹⁹

6. *Other Texts Relating to Reward*

Several other texts which drew the attention of Luther with respect to his doctrine of *sola fide* in relationship to the question of reward for service or obedience deserve mention here:

1 Cor 4:4 — "I am not aware of anything against me, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me."

2 Tim 4:8 — "... crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me on that Day, and not to me only, but also to all who have loved his appearing."

1 Cor 3:8-9 — "He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each will receive recompense according to his work."

¹¹⁴WA 20: 757.26-27.

¹¹⁵WA 49: 784.33-34.

¹¹⁶WA 32: 423.7-8, 18-19.

¹¹⁷WA 20: 716.3-7.

¹¹⁸WA 39/2: 248.11-15.

¹¹⁹WA 36: 444.10-11.

Matt 20:1-16 — Parable of the laborers in the vineyard who began work at different times of the day.

Luther analyzed 1 Cor 4:4 in great detail because his opponents wished to read from Paul's words—"I am not thereby acquitted"—a refutation of the *sola fide* and of the assurance of salvation. Luther points out that Paul simply wishes to say that when a person has a good conscience before other people, he is not necessarily thereby justified **before God**.¹²⁰ The good conscience comes from good works and would mean work-righteousness. But, continues Luther, Paul denies precisely that with the words "I am not thereby acquitted," for the Apostle indeed knows only justification by faith. The person who is thus justified can peacefully stand in God's judgment, knowing that God accepts, not according to works, but according to faith. What the person does not know is how God will judge his works.¹²¹

Thus, according to Luther, Paul is not here speaking at all about his justification. Rather, he is speaking as a Christian who is already justified, for only such a person does works that give a good conscience. But the true good conscience does not come from the works at all; it comes from grace (2 Cor 1:12).¹²² Indeed, without grace, even the person with a good conscience would be lost.¹²³ Before men, the Christian can stress his innocence and have a good reputation, for indeed he keeps the Ten Commandments; but before God, he always stands with guilt and without glory.¹²⁴

What, then, is the relationship of this interpretation to the meaning of texts like 2 Tim 4:8, which speaks about just such a glory ("crown") which God ("the righteous Judge") gives according to worthiness? Luther allows no doubt to arise that this glory comes to a person, not from worthiness (*non dignitate*), but from mercy (*per misericordiam et gratiam*).¹²⁵ No kind of justification is

¹²⁰WA 10/1 sect. 2: 139.31-33.

¹²¹WA 10/1 sect. 2: 140.1-14.

¹²²WA 10/1 sect. 2: 140.15-26.

¹²³WA 39/1: 221.20-222.6.

¹²⁴WA 10/1 sect. 2: 140.28-141.3; 36: 449.29-450.27.

¹²⁵WA 39/1: 235.32-36.

alluded to in this text, but *comfort* is expressed; for God fulfills his promises now only in part, but the Christian can be sure that the complete fulfillment is to come. The works of the one who is received by God are pleasing to God (*sub ala gratiae sunt placita et meritoria*); but they do not accomplish anything toward the first and second justification (*iustificatio, vita aeterna*), for these are gifts. Works occur—as Luther again and again emphasizes—to the honor of God and for the good of the neighbor (*pro gloria Dei, pro commodo proximi*).¹²⁶

The obedience mentioned in 1 Cor 3:8-9 doubtless makes the person a coworker (cooperator), with God, but this cooperation is no contribution of his own. Instead, it is the experience which by the Spirit is given *inwardly* and exercised in order that the gospel *outwardly* may reach other people. Why God makes use of this method is not to be questioned.¹²⁷

This survey of Luther's doctrine of work and reward would be incomplete if we left unnoticed Luther's numerous positions in reference to the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16). In this challenging pericope (*scharff Evangelium*),¹²⁸ he found the basic traits of his work-and-reward doctrine confirmed. Therefore, he regarded this parable as an important teaching (*notige und nutzliche lehr*).¹²⁹

Luther knew that many had already attempted the interpretation of this passage;¹³⁰ he himself, in the course of his reformational activity, put forth various interpretations of the details of the parable. Nevertheless, one thing was irrefutably clear to him from the early (1514-17) to the later (1544) explanations: namely, that the parable annuls the thought of merit.¹³¹

He interpreted the vineyard variably as the Jews,¹³² the Christian church,¹³³ and the Holy Scripture.¹³⁴ The workers are not only

¹²⁶WA 30/2: 667.27-32, 35-37; 668.4.

¹²⁷WA 18: 695.28-34.

¹²⁸WA 37: 275.16; 52: 136.1.

¹²⁹WA 47: 370.8-9.

¹³⁰WA 9: 563.11-13.

¹³¹WA 17/2: 140.33.

¹³²WA 47: 371.2.

¹³³WA 9: 562.30; 47: 371.17-18.

¹³⁴WA 9: 563.1.

the preachers, but also simply the believers of all times—the former under the office of the letter, the latter under that of the Spirit.¹³⁵ In general, he distinguished five groups from among the workers (*funfferley erbeiter*):¹³⁶ (1) There are those who have concluded a contract with the owner and are hungry for reward. Those are the work-righteous Jews in general (*populus Synagogae rudissimus*),¹³⁷ or the Jews at the time of Moses in particular. The contract is the Covenant.¹³⁸ (2) Another group has not made any contract, but are still hired hands (*mercenarii*); they, too, are motivated by hunger for reward (*non libero corde set cupiditate*).¹³⁹ They are the Jews at the time of the prophets in the OT.¹⁴⁰ (3, 4) Two other groups are similar to the second, for they also serve, not freely, but by command.¹⁴¹ (5) Luther believes he can distinguish yet another group who serve freely (*aus freyem geyst*) and without reckoning.¹⁴² It is this last group that is set in the first place. It consists of the people of the NT.¹⁴³

So, in reality, the five groups form only two groups: (1) that which serves for reward, and (2) the selfless one. The first can be the Jews with their works orientation,¹⁴⁴ proud Christians (*Schwermeri*),¹⁴⁵ monks, and common people¹⁴⁶—persons seeking temporal goods.¹⁴⁷ Yes, even Luther himself can be included, if he boasts about his works!¹⁴⁸ The second group includes the pagans without works,¹⁴⁹ the people who seek what is eternal,¹⁵⁰ the modest

¹³⁵ WA 9: 562.32; 565.8.

¹³⁶ WA 29: 38.10.

¹³⁷ WA 1: 133.16-18, 23; 21: 87.38; 27: 39.34.

¹³⁸ WA 9: 563.14-15.

¹³⁹ WA 1: 133.27, 21.

¹⁴⁰ WA 9: 563.24-25.

¹⁴¹ WA 1: 133.27-29.

¹⁴² WA 9: 564.38.

¹⁴³ WA 9: 563.28-35.

¹⁴⁴ WA 21: 87.38.

¹⁴⁵ WA 27: 39.5-17, 28.

¹⁴⁶ WA 27: 40.25; 37: 277.1-2.

¹⁴⁷ WA 17/2: 138.34-37.

¹⁴⁸ WA 47: 372.2-14.

¹⁴⁹ WA 21: 87.37.

¹⁵⁰ WA 17/2: 138.34-37.

Christians who stand in danger of despair¹⁵¹—in short, all who serve in the right disposition, without wish for reward.¹⁵²

The first group believes that there is correspondence between works and reward, but with God everything goes against human righteousness.¹⁵³ Luther cites the examples of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Judas and Peter. Before God they are all equal.¹⁵⁴ Men give according to merit; God gives out of kindness (*umbsonst, sola bonitate, kein recht, blos auff sein barmherzickeit*).¹⁵⁵ Collectors of merit, therefore, are deceiving themselves; those who lay claim to merit are rejected.¹⁵⁶ They want to make God a merchant, but God has radically rejected the idea of merit.¹⁵⁷

One may naturally question—on good grounds—whether all of the details that the Reformer has indicated can be read out of the parable. This, however, is not the decisive matter, and it would seem that Luther has worked out well that which really counts in the parable: (1) Before God, nothing is earned by works. (2) What matters is the disposition (*Gesinnung*). (3) Man has no claims in his relation to God. (4) There is no correspondence between work and reward. (5) God deals with man solely from his kindness (*sola bonitate!*).

7. In Conclusion

Luther's real struggle in the theological arena was his fight against the doctrine of merit. By his radical theocentricity and christocentricity (sovereignty of God, predestination, sole agency of God, concept of extrinsic grace and righteousness, total depravity of the human being), he overcame this doctrine.

It may here be pointed out that in Luther's first lecture series on the Psalms in 1513-15, he allowed the *meritum gratiae* and *gloriae* to be valid only as merit of congruity. In his lectures on

¹⁵¹WA 27: 39.18-25.

¹⁵²WA 9: 563.34.

¹⁵³WA 11: 12.10; 27: 41.4-5; 47: 370.19-20; 52: 136.12.

¹⁵⁴WA 11: 13.2-6; 37: 276.1-36.

¹⁵⁵WA 27: 41.7; 1: 134.21; 27: 41.15; 38: 27.

¹⁵⁶WA 11: 14.1-2; 21: 87.39-40.

¹⁵⁷WA 27: 40.22; 17/2: 140.33.

Romans of 1515-16, he broke with the *meritum gratiae*; and from 1518 onward, he also broke with the *meritum gloriae*.

Throughout his career, however, Luther held the biblical thought of reward. In the consecutive way of salvation, he defined reward as a consequence, granted as a gift and not as a personally achieved goal. Every passion for reward, every correspondence of work and reward, and every claim to reward are abolished. Reward is purely a reward of grace, a synonym for God's promise.