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Living by Mercy

Louis R. Tarsitano on Christian “Self-Help”

Christian bookstores are filled today with “how-to” books. These are, more or less, the religious equivalent of the “self-help” books sold in competing secular establishments.

In both kinds of stores, one can find books for fathers, mothers, children, students, doctors, lawyers, housewives, businessmen, and almost every other sort of person, promising to teach them how to be better at whatever they are doing and how to live happier lives while doing it.

It would be good to be able to say that what sets the Christian books apart from their non-Christian counterparts is the consistent theme that we should live to please God and not ourselves. But this is only occasionally the case. Americans are attracted by the idea of “self-help,” even when we are dealing with God. We like to think that we can do well by doing good, which is a concept that would come as a surprise to the great martyrs, confessors, and missionaries.

One also rarely encounters in contemporary Christian how-to books any sense of our sanctification empowered by grace in a struggle against ourselves. Too often, the fulfillment of our own aspirations, bereft of any sense of the possibility of an unexpected or undesired divine vocation, is presented as our highest possible spiritual achievement. We will be happy, we are told, when we are what we truly want to be, so that God has an absolute duty to assist us in our self-fulfillment.

Often, as well, we are told by famous evangelical pastors to embrace a works righteousness that would have made a Roman Catholic parochial school teacher of the 1950s blush. What goes unexplained is why God should owe us anything at all for doing the good works we were created to do, let alone those “good works” we have defined and chosen for ourselves. It is not, after all, what we do that saves us, but what Jesus Christ has done for us, to the glory of his Father.

We might profit by considering a time when there were fewer books but more good sense about God, and about life in communion with him. If we return to the English Reformation, for example, we find this sound advice about good works in the XIIth Article of Religion:

Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God’s judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.

Good works, it turns out, are God’s gifts to us. They are his blessing in our lives, making evident that we have received the gifts of a living Faith and justification in Jesus Christ. They are his demonstration that we are his own and his promise that he will be pleased by all that we do in the name of his Son and in imitation of him. God works in us, and he enables us to work in communion with him, through Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Ghost.

There may be worship, adoration, and obedience in true good works, but no self-help, at least not in the sense that we and our welfare are the focus of our actions. Grace liberates us from ourselves for new life in Jesus Christ, and that life is lived to the glory of the Father alone.

Moving even further back in time, we encounter two handy lists that might prove far more helpful to our Christian living than an entire rack of today’s books. These lists were developed before most Christians could read and before there was paper or ink to spare for today’s over-specialization. They are the lists of the Corporal and the Spiritual Works of Mercy.

The genius of the Works of Mercy is that they are intended as a response to the mercy of God, and

not primarily as a means of obtaining it. Our Lord did say, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7); but he also said, “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful” (Luke 6:36). It is this second admonition that the Works of Mercy seek to apply, and a look at them will demonstrate that they direct the Christian to an unselfish worship of God through mercy towards others.

The Corporal Works of Mercy:

1. To feed the hungry
2. To give drink to the thirsty
3. To clothe the naked
4. To shelter the stranger
5. To visit the sick
6. To visit and minister to prisoners
7. To bury the dead

The Spiritual Works of Mercy:

1. To convert the sinner
2. To instruct the ignorant
3. To counsel the doubtful
4. To comfort the sorrowful
5. To bear injuries patiently
6. To forgive those who harm us
7. To pray for the living and to commend the dead into the hands of a merciful Lord

These are not the sorts of things that happen by accident, and while opportunities to do them abound, they tend to be rather inconvenient. Studying to perform these Works of Mercy to the honor of our Father in heaven cannot help but draw our attention away from our own plans and direct it to his plans and purposes.

Most of all, the ancient discipline of the Works of Mercy moves us to beseech God for the grace to submit to him in all things, a prayer that most contemporary wisdom and most contemporary churches will not incline us to make.

We can, of course, read whatever books we like. But before we follow them, we might find it useful to evaluate their advice in the light of the Works of Mercy. Whatever leads us away from being merciful to others, as our Father is merciful to us, is bad advice indeed. Most of us don't need more help in being self-absorbed. We do need all the help we can get, however, in living to please Almighty God.

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