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The Theology of Thomas Aquinas, Selected Topics

March 21, 2009

Can We Merit Anything?

St. Thomas begins his discussion of merit in I-II,119,1 with the question of whether man can merit anything from God. Thomas affirms that we can on the basis of the Scriptural teaching of rewards. Many passages, including Jer. 31:16 quoted by Thomas (sc), speak of rewards for God's people. For Thomas, it is a matter of justice that rewards are only given as payment for work, which is merit. Therefore rewards imply merit on the basis of justice.

If Thomas is going to speak of justice between God and man, he must deal with the fact that justice is concerned with equality, but there is inequality between God and man. When speaking of justice between two parties of equal rank, there is a simple relationship between merit and reward. In cases where the parties are not equal, such as parent-child or master-slave relationships, there is not absolute justice between the parties, but only relative justice. Even though a child already receives from his parents more than he could repay, he can still do actions for them that are considered meritorious in a relative way.

The greatest inequality exists in the relationship between God and man because everything that man has is given to him by God. There is nothing that a man can give to God that he did not first receive from Him. When a man truly does a good work, it is only what God has ordained and empowered him to do. Similarly, when a rock falls, it is only doing what God ordained and empowered the rock to do. The rock's action is not meritorious because falling is the natural action of a rock. However, since a man has free will and could choose to not do a particular good work, whenever he does do a

good work, it is considered meritorious for him, even though he is empowered by God's grace.

When I was a Protestant, everything I heard about the Catholic doctrine of merits was that it was contrary to grace. In order to make the most of grace, our tradition wanted there to be an immediate connection from God's grace to salvation. Good works were not part of the process of salvation, but only an optional addition. Thomas seems to be adding extra steps in the middle so that grace leads to meritorious works which lead to salvation. However, as we see in this article, it is the Scriptural language of rewards that motivates Thomas, not a desire to diminish the importance of grace. Thomas makes it clear in the subsequent articles that there is no case where merit is not preceded and enabled by grace. Our salvation begins and ends with God's grace, but along the way, God calls us to contribute to the process so that our free will and participation are not bypassed.