

Mod 11 — “ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY”

by [Jack Cottrell](#)

Much of the world (including many Christians) assume that if we do something “wrong,” we can do something “right” to make up for it. In many religions this concept is the key to whatever they consider to be “salvation.” An example of this is the “balance-scale” concept of judgment. In this view every good work has a certain amount of merit attached to it; every sin has a certain amount of demerit. On the Judgment Day all good works are placed on one side of the scale and all bad works on the other. If “our good works outweigh our bad works” (as I heard a church deacon once pray), then we will be saved.

The idea that our good works can offset, make up for, or cancel out our sins is a very widespread idea. It is the essence of the Hindu concept of *karma*. It is prevalent in the Islamic idea of salvation. Here are some citations from Muslim writings: “Lo! Good deeds annul evil deeds.” “Whoever has surrounded his ill deeds with his good deeds, his scale will be heavy. His good deeds will annul his evil deeds, and whoever has surrounded his good deeds with his evil deeds certainly his scale will be light, and he is a child of Hell. His ill deeds have annulled his good deeds.” “If you have done an evil deed, then do along with it a good deed and this will erase it.” (Quotes taken from a booklet by a converted Muslim, Iskander Jadeed, who cites sources. See *Sin and Atonement in Islam and Christianity*, Basel, 27, 31, 33.)

The Roman Catholic concept and practice of indulgences (as part of the sacrament once called penance, now reconciliation) includes this concept of “extra merit.” Catholic doctrine says that the saints have more good works (more merit) than they need for themselves; all of this extra merit goes into a “treasury of merits” from which we may make withdrawals to cancel out the punishment for our venial (lesser) sins. We can make such withdrawals by doing our own good works, even though they have a lesser degree of merit. Together, our meritorious works (perhaps 5% of the needed merit) plus the saints’ surplus merit (the other needed 95%) make up for our sin.

All such ideas assume that in our obedience to God, we can go “above and beyond the call of duty”; i.e., we can do something good that is somehow not needed for its own sake, and use it to pay our sin-debt to God. This is the concept of “extra merit.”

The sad truth is this: in our life of obedience to God’s laws, THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS EXTRA MERIT! There is no such thing as “going above and beyond the call of duty.” This is an important lesson taught by Jesus in his parable of the “unprofitable servant” (Luke 17:7-10, NKJV): “And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down to eat’? But will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which

you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’”

What is Jesus teaching here? He is showing us that as God’s creatures we already owe him every good deed, every act of obedience that we can possibly do. This is our creature-debt; we owe the Creator the debt of perfect obedience to our law code. Perfection is our duty: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). “But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct” (1 Peter 1:15).

Here is what this means: even if we were living a perfect life, we would have no “profit,” nothing above and beyond what is our duty to do. This further means that *we can never do something extra to make up for our sins!* Why not? Because every good thing we can possibly do is already owed to God as a requirement. When you do not do some good thing you are supposed to do (i.e., when you sin), this is like getting behind in the payment of your debt of obedience. Now in addition to owing God your ongoing debt of perfect obedience, you owe him the debt of penalty for disobedience. And once you get behind like this, **YOU CAN NEVER CATCH UP!** Why not? Because you will never have any extra good works (works not already owed to God) to apply to your sin-debt.

Here’s an illustration. Let’s say that when I met my future wife, I was so desperate to marry her that I willingly signed her shrewd prenuptial agreement. In this agreement I agreed to immediately transfer to her the ownership of EVERY THING and EVERY PENNY I then possessed *and ever would possess* by no matter what means. Two years after we married, she discovered I had NOT been giving to her two dollars from my paycheck every week. I had been withholding it to sneak a Skyline chili once in a while. She rightfully demanded to know what I planned to do about the \$104.00 I owed her. In despair I frantically promised I would soon repay her. In pity she looked at me and said, “What with?” (Fortunately this is only an illustration.)

The point of Jesus’ parable is simply this: every act of obedience we can do is already owed to God as our creature-debt. We cannot use what we already owe via that debt, to pay off our sin-debt. Thus we have only two choices: (1) live a perfect life and “stay even,” and thus avoid hell via our own works; or (2) sin just once and fall behind in our sin-debt forever. We all know where we stand.

How then can sinners be saved? **ONLY BY GRACE** – in the form of Jesus’ perfect atonement for our sin. His propitiatory death is the only thing that can truly “make up for” our sin. His sacrifice for us is the only true “extra merit”; only Jesus has “gone above and beyond the call of duty.” His “extra merits,” earned via his death on the cross, are what go on the other side of the balance scale, canceling out our sins and giving us eternal life. “Not the labors of my hands can fulfill Thy law’s demands. Could my tears forever flow; could my zeal no respite know! All for sin could not atone—THOU must save, and Thou alone.”

Finally, I want to point out that the depiction of God in the “unprofitable servant” parable is very severe and stern and unyielding. Is this what our God is truly like? Yes, but remember this: there are **TWO SIDES** to God’s nature: his sternness (severity, holiness) and his kindness (goodness, love), as seen in Romans 11:22. This parable does represent the former. But see Luke 12:35-37,

which shows how God treats sinners according to the GRACE side of his nature! Let us not forget the lesson of the parable in Luke 17, but let us rest our hope in God as he is shown in Luke 12. It is not WE who go above and beyond the call of duty, but GOD.