# Christian Liberty

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The idea of freedom from the Law of God is one of the most important, and also one of the most deeply perplexing, themes in Christian ethics. It is widely agreed that Christian ethics ought not to be "legalistic." All too often, however, confusion sets in at this point, and the alternative to legalism that is offered us turns out to be irrationalism or act utilitarianism. From time to time, throughout the history of Christianity, the idea of Christian liberty has been carried to clearly unacceptable extremes of antinomianism. Even more disturbing, because more prevalent, are difficulties that have arisen in rejecting antinomianism; Christian liberty has been so interpreted as to be compatible with moralities that are very oppressive and ways of life that seem anything but free.

It is my hope to work out a conception of Christian liberty that avoids these dangers. There are two sides to the conception. Christian liberty is in the first place a feature of an ethical system, of the system of divine commands. But it is also a motivational ideal, a conception of the subjective freedom with which a person ought to respond to life's occasions. These two sides are inseparable; we are concerned with the kind of freedom that has to be built into the moral principles under which we see ourselves as living, in order to make it possible for us to be, or to become increasingly, the kind of people we ought to be, with the kinds of motives and projects we ought to have. My interest in this subject is part of a more general interest in the relation between the ethics of actions and the ethics of motives. In its most abstract form the central problem that will concern us in the present essay is how to provide a proper place in the ethical life for *beliefs* about what one *ought* to *do*, without letting them drive out other springs of action, such as *love* for human individuals.

In our study of relations between love and obligation, we will have occasion to discuss four main aspects of Christian liberty: I call them

freedom from fear (section 1), theonomy (section 2), friendship with God (section 3), and the possibility of supererogation (section 4). There are certainly other aspects of liberty that are important in Christianity—political aspects of liberty, for example, and freedom from the bondage of sin, which is the freedom most emphasized in the New Testament. But I think the four aspects that will be examined here are the most important for the idea of freedom from the Law of God.

## 1. FREEDOM FROM FEAR

One thing that is certainly meant when Christians say that Christ has set us free from the Law is that we need not earn our salvation by obedience and good works. Indeed we *cannot* earn salvation that way, first of all because we are not good enough and more profoundly because salvation is the enjoyment of God's love, which is in its very nature grace and not the kind of thing that can be earned. Salvation is God's free gift.

It remains, however, that Christians must (in some important ethical sense of 'must') fulfill many duties. For instance, they must not murder, steal, cheat, or do other immoral actions. Paul is quite emphatic about this, despite his proclamation of freedom from the Law. Thus far there is no inconsistency. To say that we do not have to do good works in order to be saved, or to avoid damnation, is not to say that we are not morally obliged to do them or that God does not command them. The commands of a trusted authority are still commands and may stringently bind our conscience, even if they are not enforced by threats of punishment or promises of reward. There are things that we morally *have* to do, even if we would not be punished for not doing them.

Suppose that as I braked my car when approaching a crosswalk full of pedestrians, I believed I would incur no punishment, divine or human, if I ran right over them. I hope I would still *want* to stop, just as much as if I feared punishment. But I also hope I would still think I *had* to stop. Failing to stop would be a truly horrible action in relation to the pedestrians; ethically and religiously it would be wrong, a violation of something sacred, a sin. We may try to articulate this by saying it is forbidden by God. It would be a distraction in this context to add that it will be punished by God. To say that an act is a sin is to say something about the act itself, in relation to God, rather than about its consequences for the agent.

It is worth dwelling on this point about obligation, for theologians have often not grasped it. Penitential practices, and the concept of mor-

tal sin, have led in some Catholic moral theology to a tendency to measure the stringency of some ethical obligation by the severity of punishment connected with it. In Protestant theological ethics, on the other hand, an emphasis on salvation by grace has sometimes led to an attempt to eliminate obligation from Christian ethics entirely, rather than to a rejection of the definition of obligation in terms of punishment.

Connected with this in Protestant thought is a dangerous temptation to flatten out ethical distinctions, due to an emphasis on the sinfulness of *all* our actions. The emphasis, I think, is correct; even our best actions are deeply infected with sin. It remains, however, that certain actions *have* to be done, and others do not. Conversely, an act may be sinful, in the sense of proceeding from motives that are sins, even if it is not itself *a sin* in the sense that concerns us here. This point about the relation between acts we ought to perform and motives we ought to have is important. Even if I know that I will have sinful motives for whatever I do now, I have also to recognize that ethically there are certain things I *must* do, and other things I *must not* do. For example, I *have to* stop my car to avoid hitting a pedestrian, whether or not my motives in stopping will be free of sin.

I have been arguing against suggestions that the fact that we need not, and cannot, earn our salvation frees us from all obligation to perform actions commanded by God. In what sense, then, does faith in salvation by God's grace free Christians from the Law? The answer commonly given is the correct answer. Faith in God's grace frees us from fear—more precisely, from the fear that he will hate us, or treat us as if he hated us, if we do wrong. We are still to do good works, but we are to do them out of gratitude and devotion to God and love for our neighbors, not out of fear of punishment.

Two sorts of questions arise about this claim of freedom from fear. (1) The replacement of fear by love as a motive is an important part of the Christian ethical ideal. But is there no place at all for fear in the Christian life? "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). But who is already perfect in love? Not being perfect in love, we ought perhaps to fear the sins themselves that we might commit, even if we ought not to fear that God will hate us for them. And surely Christians ought to be free from the fear of earthly potentates (Matt. 10:28, but cf. Rom. 13:4); but ought they in no sense to fear the Lord? How should the doctrine of salvation be understood, if it offers us freedom from fear of God's hatred and eternal punishment? But these questions will have to wait for another occasion. They would lead us away from the main lines of our argument.

(2) Love and gratitude are surely better motives than fear of punishment, but why should the replacement of the latter by the former be regarded as conferring *liberty*? The first thought that occurs to us in this connection is that to the extent that an action is done from fear of punishment it is not done gladly but under constraint. Actions done from gratitude to God are supposed to be done gladly—the more so the more one trusts in God for the assurance of one's own welfare in the long run. Indeed one may be glad to receive commands from God, so that one may have a way of serving him. This difference in motivation certainly has to do with freedom, for it is a sort of bondage or unfreedom to be constrained to do what one cannot gladly do.

On the other hand, making us like what we have to do is not enough to make us free. That is almost a commonplace in political thought where we have learned to be sensitive to the danger of talk about a "true freedom" which on accurate examination turns out not to be freedom at all. In theology as in politics such talk tempts us to give up the quest for freedom too easily. The replacement of fear by gratitude does not exhaust the meaning of 'Christian liberty'. For being bound in gratitude is still being bound, even if one likes it. And it would be sentimental to suppose that what is done out of love and gratitude is always done gladly.

Suppose one were bound in gratitude to the fulfillment of an arbitrary set of rules governing every detail of one's life. It would be odd to call that liberty, even if one liked it. Christian moralists would generally repudiate such an ethical system as "legalistic," and would do so in the name of Christian liberty. We must therefore look for other aspects of Christian freedom from the Law, besides freedom from fear.

## 2. THEONOMY

"Everything is permitted," wrote St. Paul, "but not everything is helpful" (1 Cor. 10:23). Both the context and the content of this statement make it clear that he is talking about Christian liberty. It is also very natural (at least for a philosopher) to take 'but not everything is helpful' as proposing a consequentialist morality. On this reading the message would be that the Christian is freed from deontology for a teleological ethics. This interpretation of freedom from the Law has been very influential in Christian ethics. It can even lead to equating the ethics of love with a form of act utilitarianism, as in Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics*.[1]

Such a Christian utilitarianism does offer the most obvious way of constructing a complete moral guide to action on the basis of the single

commandment, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' It construes the commandment as directing us to promote the good of all people, weighing the interests of each person exactly as much as our own. Each person is to count for one, as the classical utilitarians insisted. Utilitarianism can thus be seen as a secular rendition of the commandment of neighbor-love. At worst it carries to an indefensible extreme one of the genuine central themes of Christian ethics. It is no accident that Christian philosophers such as Berkeley and Paley were among the first utilitarians.

Nonetheless the utilitarian version of Christian love is disastrously lopsided. I will not rehearse here all the standard criticisms of utilitarianism. But I will observe, in the first place, that Christianity has usually recognized a more than merely instrumental value in apparently deontological principles regarding, for example, truth-telling, fidelity, and sexual relations. This is so clearly true of Paul's own concrete ethical teaching that it is hard to believe that he really meant to propound a rigorously teleological ethics.

In the second place, it is not obvious what utilitarianism has to do with Christian liberty. It can be seen itself as a harsh slavery. There will virtually always be something it tells us we are obliged to be doing, for there is no limit to the demands of good to be maximized and harm to be prevented. As receptacles of happiness we may or may not have the good fortune to exemplify conveniently the end to be promoted; but as agents, where action has only instrumental value, we satisfy Aristotle's description of a slave, as a "living tool."[2] There is nothing so degrading, dishonorable, or evil, nothing so inimical to our loves or so opposed to our ideals, than we may not be obliged by utilitarianism to do it, if the results will be good enough.[3] Utilitarianism is not Christian liberty.

"Everything is permitted, but not everything is helpful" (1 Cor. 10:23; cf. 6:12). Many scholars think that Paul would not have chosen the words 'Everything is permitted' of his own accord, but that they were a slogan of Corinthian libertines against whom he was arguing, which Paul tried to turn to his own purposes with the qualification, 'but not everything is helpful'. Be that as it may, the sentence has to be stretched to fit much of Paul's ethical teaching. There are certainly kinds of behavior of which he has much worse to say than that they are not "helpful." This is true in particular about fornication, which is one of the topics to which he seems to apply the saying that everything is permitted but not everything is helpful (1 Cor. 6:12–20).

The saying agrees much more easily with what Paul has to say about the other topic to which he applies it—the eating of food that has been offered in pagan sacrifices (1 Cor. 10:14–11:1). Paul seems to be

saying that in this area at least, Christians ought to be governed by teleological considerations. He is fiercely insistent on certain non-teleological principles – for instance, that idols must not be worshipped. With regard to food, however, "everything is permitted." There are no kinds of food intrinsically forbidden, no dietary rules deontologically binding on Christians. What concerns us here is not the difference between Christianity and Judaism on this point, but the fact that the placing of dietary matters under teleological rather than deontological constraints seems to Paul to be an instance of Christian liberty. Is there really a positive connection between teleology and liberty?

Yes. A person who is taking the means she judges most effective toward an end she thinks she ought to pursue is freer, more independent, in an important way, than one who merely follows a rule. She has made a certain project her own, and relies on her own judgment in carrying it out. But this sort of liberty does not require utilitarianism or a rigorously teleological ethics. What it requires is that we be given *discretion*. If we are given discretion we need a sense of what is morally important; for we have the responsibility of weighing morally relevant considerations against each other and finding the best course of action, without having a rule that can be applied mechanically to determine what we ought to do. This responsibility may be found as well in weighing deontological considerations against each other, or against teleological considerations, as in weighing teleological considerations against each other. A person is not necessarily less free or less responsible in choosing to be truthful or to respect the rights of her neighbor, *rather than* to bring about the best possible state of affairs.

Utilitarianism, therefore, does not provide the only model, nor in my opinion the best, for understanding the sense in which an ethics exemplifying Christian liberty must be "contextual." A better model is provided by what John Rawls has called "intuitionism," which is "the doctrine that there is an irreducible family of first principles which have to be weighed against one another by asking ourselves which balance, in our considered judgment, is the most just."[4] This is only a model, a philosophical first approximation to an understanding of the structure of this aspect of Christian ethics. We shall shortly question some features of it, but for the time being let us work with Rawls' conception. He notes that the first principles in an intuitionistic theory could all be teleological, endorsing competing *goods* whose claims are not to be adjudicated by any universally applicable formula.[5] But the intuitionism I have in mind includes some first principles that are not teleological, not concerned with the value of the resulting states of affairs. Such a doctrine allows for no less discretion, or reliance on one's own judgment,

than utilitarianism. Indeed it engages a wider range of faculties. It calls on one not only to calculate what action is most likely to have the best consequences, but also to judge, on occasion, whether something else is more imperative than obtaining the best result.

"I no longer call you slaves," says Jesus in John 15:15, "for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father." Slavery is found here in being obliged to do what one does not see the point of. If the slave is a "living tool," it is not necessary for him to see beyond his immediate task. Christians are said not to be God's slaves, but his friends, because he has not merely given them instructions, but has shown them what he is doing. God's friend is not a tool; he or she is invited to be a participant in God's projects, seeing the point of them. The point need not be understood teleologically, or in terms of goods to be maximized; it may sometimes be found more in what is expressed or symbolized by one's actions than in what results from them; it may also be found in a reckless, imprudent loyalty to principles or ideals. Insofar as God's friends see the point of the teachings and the lives that are given to them, they have the responsibility of deciding accordingly what they ought to do.

Shall we conclude, then, that Christians are never to accept any rules or obligations that they do not see the point of? Hardly. The moral development of a child involves much acceptance of rules and directives on authority, simply because they are commanded. In the process of learning to live the Christian life, as a child or as an adult, one will doubtless be wise to accept the authority of some Christian ethical teaching even when one does not see the value of the recommended course of action. But I think it is New Testament teaching that the blindness of such obedience, on any given point, is not to be acquiesced in as a permanent condition. Rather, there is to be a development—a development in Tillich's terms, not from heteronomy to autonomy, but from heteronomy to theonomy. "Autonomy asserts that man . . . is his own law. Heteronomy asserts that man . . . must be subjected to a law, strange and superior to him. Theonomy asserts that the superior law is at the same time, the innermost law of man himself, rooted in the divine ground which is man's own ground."[6] The Christian ideal is not one of heteronomous subjection to a law whose motives are alien to the human agent; it is an ideal of theonomous permeation of the human faculties by the Spirit of God, so that the human agent comes to love what God loves and to see ethical priorities as God sees them.

Paul describes just such a development, on a communal rather than an individual scale, as part of the history of the people of God. The

Law was our *paidagogos* to prepare us for Christ. We were kept under guardianship until Christ came, and until God sent his Spirit into our hearts; since then we are no longer slaves, but sons (Gal. 3:23–26, 4:17). Theonomous, internal guidance by the Spirit has replaced heteronomous, external control by the Law.[7] This development is to be recapitulated in the history of the individual Christian, as it was in Paul's own life.

Perhaps no Christian has completed this development. Perhaps all still have some occasion for obedience that is in some degree blind. Sin blinds us to the point and importance of many moral considerations, and we all have reason to want the advice of others when we face difficult decisions. Nonetheless the Christian is called to vision, not blindness. If intuitionism in Rawls' sense is a good model for the structure of Christian ethics, the Christian is not given a procedure that can be applied mechanically to determine the right course of action. Without such a mechanical procedure, Christian decision making calls for a just sense of the comparative importance of various ethical considerations; and it is not likely that one will have a just sense of how much weight should be given to a principle that one does not see the point of. Intuitionistic decision making requires a light that heteronomy does not provide.

That is not to say that it requires an explicit rationale for every ethical decision. The art of making good intuitionistic decisions is quite different from the art of giving philosophical or theological justifications. And *seeing the point* of an ethical consideration is not so much a matter of being able to explain the point, as of having a feeling for the values involved.

Theologically, the term 'intuitionism' seems inadequate as a characterization of Christian ethics. What may be regarded from a secular viewpoint merely as "intuition" is seen by Christians as *inspiration*. And if we speak of a "discretion" that is given to us as an aspect of Christian liberty, it is not a matter of being entirely on our own. It is not only a freedom from the heteronomous control of an external law; it is also a freedom for the guidance of the Spirit of God within. It is quite explicit in Paul that the leading of the Spirit is the Christian alternative to heteronomous subjection to the letter of a law. "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under a law" (Gal. 5:18). "For the letter kills, but the Spirit makes alive . . . And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:6, 17).

The Holy Spirit is regarded, however, as working *through* the faculties of a human being, enlightening the mind and awakening, purifying, and sensitizing the heart of love. And it would be presumptuous to suppose that we can separate divine and human input so neatly as to be able to distinguish sharply in practice between inspiration and mere intu-

ition. The Christian can still speak, therefore, of receiving "discretion," in the sense of the freedom to be guided by the faculties that are to be opened to the Spirit.

The Pauline contrast of Spirit and letter suggests another respect in which Rawls' conception of intuitionism does not correspond with the structure of Christian ethics. Rawls speaks of intuitionist decision making as based on "an irreducible family of first principles."[8] In Christian ethics one's ultimate loyalty is not supposed to be to any "principles" or theory (for that would be living by "the letter"), but to a person. To be sure, loyalty to a person will be embodied, at any given time, in an intention to pursue certain goals and act in accordance with certain principles. But what goals and principles those are can change while the loyalty to the person remains. In a lifetime of loyalty to Christ, one's ethical goals and principles may change in ways that one cannot precisely define in advance, as one's understanding of Christ develops; and all of that change may remain within the intent of the same basic Christian commitment. This openness to the modification of goals and principles is also a part of Christian liberty, and of responsiveness to the Spirit of Christ.

The friend of Christ is called to understand what is morally important, see a point in many rules, choose suitable means to morally valuable ends, weigh conflicting rules and ends according to their importance, and be open to the possibility that his principles ought to be modified. A person who fulfilled this calling would be free in a very important sense.

But he could still be governed by a morality that rigorously determined every detail of his life. It would not be to him an arbitrary collection of rules; every part of it would be charged with significance. But it would tell him that in every situation there is some one course of action that he is ethically obliged to choose. It would tell him that everything he does will be either an ethical transgression, or perhaps an error of judgment, or else something he must do. He could never say to himself, "I may do this, but I don't have to." This seems to me to be less than the fullness of Christian liberty.

A major source of this difficulty is that in what we have said about theonomy we have still been concerned with ways of forming *beliefs* or *judgments* about what one *ought* to do. But if one has such beliefs completely determining one's conduct, one will hardly be able ever to act directly and purely from any motive except conscientiousness, if one is conscientious. This does not fit very well with the conception of Christian ethics as an ethics of love. For these reasons I believe that we should look for something more in Christian liberty, besides theonomy and

freedom from fear, though in going beyond this point we enter territory that is more controversial theologically.

## 3. SLAVERY AND FRIENDSHIP

In the social context of the New Testament, the free person, the ε'λεύΘερος in the literal sense, was the person who was *not a slave*. 'Freedom' thus had a less individualistic meaning than it usually does for us. It did signify exemption from some forms of social constraint; but more fundamental it signified a social position, a status of full membership in the family or community.[9] The contrast between the slave and the free slides into a contrast between the slave and the son (John 8:31–36).

In this context, Christian liberty appears first of all as a form of personal relationship with God. Slavery, as a metaphor for our relationship with God, is treated ambivalently in the New Testament. In many passages, following a common practice in ancient religions, Christians are spoken of as slaves of God or of Christ. But there are other passages, fewer in number but striking and carefully worked out, in which it is said that Christians are no longer God's slaves, but his children (Gal. 3:23–4:11, 4:21–5:1; cf. John 8:31–36) or his friends (John 15:15). The idea of Christian liberty can be illuminated by reflecting, as we began to do in the last section, on differences between slavery and sonship or friendship. I shall concentrate on friendship here, since it is a simpler relationship which is or ought to be an element in parent-child relationships.

Slaves are treated as belonging to their masters. To want someone as a friend is also to want him or her to belong to you. But it is a different kind of belonging.

When we say a physical object "belongs to" a person, we usually mean that the person *owns* the object. To own an object is normally to have, by right if not always in fact, complete control over it. If I own a house, I have the right to go in and out whenever I like, to paint it whatever color I like, to add a room or take off a porch, or even to tear down the house entirely. And I have a right that you should not come in the house without my permission, that you should not paint it without my permission, and so forth. I also have the right to sell the house or give it away, or to rent it or lend it to someone else for a period of time. While I own it, the purpose of the house is simply that it should serve my purposes.

The master is spoken of (monstrously) as "owning" his slaves. The relationship is conceived on the analogy of ownership of a physical object.

To claim to own another person as a slave is to claim an almost unrestricted right to control that person's actions and to make your purposes the purpose of his life.

If you want another person to belong to you as a friend, you want something very different. You certainly want to have some claims on him, which will limit his freedom in some ways; but it is not primarily control that you are after. If you look on someone as "a living tool," you cannot have him as your friend, as Aristotle rightly held.[10] Neither is it compatible with true friendship to feed your ego on the experience of dominating the other person, as in the Hegelian conception of the master-slave relationship. In desiring friendship, rightly understood, you want some blurring of the line between "mine" and "thine," some taking of the other person's ends as your ends and of yours as his. But you do not want to think that he exists only to please and satisfy you; you see his happiness, his creativity, his integrity as important in themselves.

In friendship one seeks rights to intimacy, much more than control. The intimacy may be as deep and comprehensive as in marriage, or it may be something as basic and unromantic as being entitled to phone at ten o'clock at night and say, 'Hi, this is _____. How *are* you? We haven't talked in ages.' One does not want to control every detail of one's friend's life; one wants on the contrary to participate in his freely being himself. One claims the right to speak and act freely in his presence, and one claims his free response. One wants one's friends to be able to do good things for one that they did not have to do.

If you belong to another person in friendship, part of what may be involved is that your personality is to be open to the entry of your friend's emotions, so that you can be moved by his sorrows and inspired by his enthusiasms and share in his loves. One thing Christians have had in mind when they have spoken of being filled with the Holy Spirit is such an entry of God's emotions or attitudes into their own. This is a kind of influence a friend may have on you, but it is not the obedience that is demanded of a slave. Being inspired by one friend's emotions is quite different from trying consciously and voluntarily to satisfy his desires.

In a way, one should expect that an omnipotent God would rather have friends than slaves, if he were interested in having creatures like us at all. He needs no tools; why should he want "living tools"? Is he so unsure of himself that he wants to draw spiritual sustenance from the experience of dominating us? If it is astonishing that an infinite being should want us for his friends, it is not surprising that an omnipotent being should prefer not to control every detail of his creatures' lives.

To be sure, this raises certain problems. I will not discuss here the familiar metaphysical issues about how an omnipotent God could create

beings not completely determined causally by him. But the idea of God leaving us morally as well as causally free raises ethical issues, which cannot be evaded here, about indifferent and supererogatory actions.

## 4. SUPEREROGATION

In order to have a morally free choice, we must have plurality of possibilities of action that are ethically permitted but not ethically required. Such situations must belong to one of two types. If none of the permitted alternative actions is ethically better than any of the others, we may say that all of them are (ethically) "indifferent." If one of them is ethically better than some ethically permitted alternative, we may say that the better action is "supererogatory." If no possible actions are indifferent or supererogatory, then we are never morally free to choose among alternatives.

The utilitarian doctrine that one ought always to do the action that will have the best results comes at least close to excluding morally free choice in this way. It makes indifferent actions rare, because actions will normally differ at least slightly in the value (or probable value) of their results. And it excludes supererogation entirely, because if an action will have better results than some alternative, the latter is not permitted by this utilitarian ethics. If you can do better, you are obliged to do better; so you can never do a better act than you are obliged to do. These are main reasons why such a utilitarianism is a harsh servitude, as I have already remarked. The chief loophole for liberty in this morality is the impossibility of calculating probable utilities reliably and accurately enough to get clear guidance from it in many situations.

I believe that the possibility of both indifferent and supererogatory actions should be regarded as part of Christian liberty. This possibility is important both for the sake of morally free choice and as a consequence of the idea that God, wanting to have us as his friends rather than slaves, does not wish to determine every detail of our lives by his commands. The question may be raised whether the possibility of indifferent actions would not be enough for these purposes; must we also have supererogatory actions open to us? But I think the possibility of supererogatory actions is very important for Christian or moral liberty, chiefly because an ethics that is sensitive to the finer nuances of the moral life will not leave enough possible actions indifferent. Furthermore it seems appropriate to think of God as wanting his friends to be able to do good things for him (and for each other) that they did not have to do.

The idea of supererogation has been controversial among Christians. Two main objections call for discussion here. One is that if supererogation were possible, and we could therefore do more than is commanded, we could deserve—or perhaps even more than deserve—divine salvation; whereas the objectors have insisted that we can never even come close to deserving salvation. This issue can be largely evaded here;[11] for in calling an action "supererogatory" I do not mean to imply anything about a reward that it deserves from God (whether or not that has been implied by the term in some theological contexts). I mean only that from an ethical point of view the action is not obligatory but is permitted and is better than some permitted alternative. No doubt it would in some ways be praiseworthy to do such a thing; but there are at least two reasons why we can maintain the possibility of supererogatory actions without having to admit that we can even come close to deserving divine salvation. The first reason is that as salvation consists chiefly in the enjoyment of God's love, it is not the kind of thing that a creature like us can earn or deserve at all. It is in its very nature a matter of grace rather than of merit. The second reason is that the possibility of doing a better thing than one is strictly obliged to do does not necessarily imply a possibility of living a better life than it can rightly be said that one ought to live. The occasional performance of a supererogatory action is much easier than a perfectly consistent fulfillment of all one's duties. I imagine that virtually all of us sometimes do something supererogatory but do not always do our duty. If so, we do not act as well as we ought to, in spite of our works of supererogation. Whether we are living as good a life as we ought to live depends, moreover, on our motives and attitudes as well as our actions. If we do many works of supererogation, but do them in a grudging or loveless or self-righteous spirit, we are certainly living less well than we ought.

The other main objection to supererogation is more relevant to my conception, and more disturbing to me. It is also an objection to the possibility of indifferent actions. Does only a part of our life belong to God? Shouldn't all of our actions express our devotion to God? If so, how can any action be supererogatory?

Christian ethics has always been a morality of devotion, demanding that the Christian ethical concern be at the center of the individual's whole life. It allows that there are things that we may and should do for ourselves, but it has refused to admit a sharp separation between one's own private interests, insofar as they are legitimate, and God's interests or the interests of the Kingdom. The demand for devotion may be seen as a characteristically religious feature of Christian ethics. Perhaps a secular morality could make room for supererogation by being related

to individuals much as the Federal Trade Commission is related to American business corporations—not as central to the main business of life but as a constraint on it. For Christianity, however, an ethics that only sets boundaries to life-projects that may remain basically selfish would represent the loss of an essential good.

How, then, can we maintain the possibility of supererogatory action and still have an ethics of devotion? I have discussed other aspects of ideals of religious and ethical devotion more fully elsewhere than is possible here.[12] In the present context I want to explore the relation between such ideals and the possibility of supererogation. I will do this in the form of a philosophical meditation on a story from the gospel according to Mark (14:3–7):

> And while [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the jar and poured it over his head. But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment thus wasted? For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." And they reproached her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me."

"*She has done a beautiful thing.*" The first reaction I can remember having to this story is that the people who thought it would have been better to give the money to the poor were right.[13] And I still think that might indeed have been an even better thing to do. It was a lot of money—three hundred days' wages for an unskilled laborer. Jesus could be taken, in this narrative, as arguing that the woman actually did the best possible thing. But that is not asserted, and the story need not be read that way. It is enough that she did a *beautiful* thing; we do not have to worry about whether it was the *best* thing she could have done.

The demand to maximize value—either the value of one's actions or the value of their consequences, or both—appeals greatly to the "strenuous mood" in ethics. "The good is the enemy of the best," it is said. How can our conscience be at peace with a deed that is only good, or even "beautiful"? How can it not be wrong to do less than the best that we can?

Appealing as it may be in the abstract, this demand to maximize can be repulsively unappreciative in the concrete. That is clear in this story, if in thinking about it we focus on the people rather than on the money. It is not just that the people who reproached the woman were being unkind. The more fundamental point is that it is outrageous to

think of what she did as a transgression. It was a generous expression of love (which violated no one's rights), and the fact (if it is a fact) that she could have done something even better instead does not keep it from being a beautiful deed.

'But shouldn't a Christian want always to do whatever is *most* pleasing to God?' This is a subtle question, with subtle temptations. We may be tempted to assume that the action most pleasing to God will be the best—that is, the most meritorious. But this is not necessarily right. It is not by admiring us that God takes pleasure in us, and it is not by *performing* for him that we please him. "There is more joy in Heaven over one sinner that repents than over ninety-nine righteous that have no need of repentance" (Luke 15:7). What pleases God is that we accept his love, and love him and one another. A saint is not an especially meritorious person, but a person especially transparent to God's grace.

Christian liberty is freedom not only from fear of punishment but also from self-righteousness and its attendant anxieties. Christian liberty renounces the project of self-justification, of showing that one is always in the right, and accepts the fact that one never is entirely in the right. In relation to this descent from the pedestal on which we love to place ourselves, the pursuit of merit is a very questionable motive. A commitment to justice, a love of one's neighbor—those are good motives, which may lead one to highly meritorious actions. But the love of merit as such is something different; and I think it is commonly a bad motive, a desire to climb up on the pedestal.

I agree that there is a sort of perfection, or an ideal, that we ought to aspire to exemplify. But I do not think that being concerned always to do the very best thing that one can is a part of that ideal. I do not believe that God himself is concerned to do only the best. Could he not have made better creatures instead of us? I see no reason to suppose that there is a best possible life for any finite creature nor a best possible world of finite creatures (nor that a perfect God must actualize the best possible world if there is one).[14] Maximizing is not God's game. Neither is it supposed to be ours.

"She has done a *beautiful* thing." Christian liberty will sometimes be freedom for aesthetic goods and for actions of primarily symbolic value. It will also be freedom for intellectual goods and for sheer play. These are all things that can hardly flourish in an atmosphere in which it is assumed that every possible action is either obligatory or wrong—that only what has to be done may be done. They are rarely what has to be done and lose their character if they are made means to something else that has to be done. Severe moralists have often viewed some or all of these goods with suspicion. And we may wonder how there can justifi-

ably be time or energy or other resources for such luxuries in a world in which there are such desperate needs for the bare necessities of human life.

If our calling is to belong to an omnipotent creator as his children and his friends and not as slaves, it is not a calling to a life filled to capacity with things that *have* to be done. We may find this hard to accept if we focus our attention on all the things in the world that seem to need doing. But the Christian life is not founded on need but on gift—not on our poverty but on God's wealth. It rests on the omnipotence of God. People sometimes think of belief in divine omnipotence as inimical to human freedom, but here I think it is liberating. The reason why there is room in the Christian life for things that do not need to be done is that God does not need us as his instruments. "He hath no pleasure in the strength of an horse; neither delighteth he in any man's legs" (Psalm 147:10). Any goal to which our action might be merely a means, God can accomplish without us. So if he has commanded us to pursue certain ends, it is because he cares not only about those ends but also about our pursuit of them. If he invites us to be his friends, he invites us to regard our lives as important to him for their own sakes, and to value them accordingly.

The idea of the sabbath has its place here. Sabbath is rest from work before it is specifically religious activity. Work, in the sense that is centrally relevant here, is activity that is merely or mainly instrumental and not enjoyed for its own sake. For a creator who is omnipotent and already enjoys in himself more perfection than can possibly be embodied in creatures, creation cannot be merely work. It is also play, or sabbath—doing things that do not have to be done but that he likes to do. His children and friends are bidden to share in his sabbath—to have time and take time for things that do not serve extrinsic necessities but are done or enjoyed for their own sakes. Among these things are not only (and above all) worship, but also more optional enjoyments, such as art or philosophy or play.

"*Whenever you will, you can do good to them.*" Is it optional, then, to do good to the poor? Surely not. It is scandalous how little the world's rich do for the world's poor. A few ancient manuscripts of the New Testament accordingly correct the text to 'Whenever you will, you can do good to them *always*.'[15] But that makes nonsense of 'whenever you will.'

Jesus' saying is more profound. There is a bite to it. "Whenever you will." You have had plenty of opportunity to do good to the poor. But how often and how much have you wanted to? You who criticize this woman's action, have you really done so much for the poor that you

have nothing left for any other sort of generosity? Far from telling us that caring for the economic needs of the poor is a ministry of secondary importance, Jesus' saying stands as a reproach to the weakness and intermittency of our concern for those needs. And yet it does have something to say about the relation of freedom and human need in the vocation of Christians. It recognizes that we are surrounded by a sea of needs that are urgent, that we have to care about, and that we will never finish meeting. But in spite of this it denies that the Christian life is one in which there is room only for things that *have* to be done to meet human needs. It is to be a life in which one is really free for worship, and for love, because one is free to anoint the body of Jesus for burial without worrying about whether that will accomplish something that really needed to be done.

It is important that the ideal of devotion belongs primarily to the ethics of motives, attitudes, and traits of character. As Emil Brunner has written, "God does not wish to have my obedience as something which is valuable in itself. He wants *me*, my whole personality in the totality of all my actions, both inward and outward."[16] He commands us not only to do good to other people, but to *want* to do it. He commands us to *love them*. And if (as seems clear) it is *they* who are to be the object of this love, the devotion that is demanded is more than obedience. God seeks a response from us that is inspired not only by respect for his commands, but also by love for what he loves—specifically including our neighbors. Inviting us to participate as friends in his projects, he wants us not only to see what is important to him, but also to care about it, as he does, for its own sake.

Of course motives are related to actions, and therefore the ethics of motives is not unrelated to the ethics of actions. Few if any of us care as much as we should about the good of others, and particularly of the poor. If we fully loved our neighbors as ourselves, we would, no doubt, act differently, and much more generously. It is often true that a particular individual *ought* to be *doing* more to meet the needs of others, and some (not all) of the reasons that can be given for this conclusion are based on principles about the motives that we ought to have.

It does not follow, however, that there is a level of self-sacrifice in action that is characteristic of ideal love and that we are ethically *required* to achieve (and currently fail to achieve). The ideals, and even the commandments, of an ethics of motives are not correlated so simply with imperatives in an ethics of actions. What we *would* do if we loved as we should is not necessarily something that we ought to think we *have* to do, or that a perfected saint would think she *had* to do. It might indeed be precisely something that we (and she) do not have to do.

Moreover, there is apt to be no concretely precise answer to the question, what we would do if we were perfect in love, as the directions in which the energies of saintliness may flow are indefinitely various.

This last point, about the diversity of saintly motivation, is important for avoiding a tempting error. The following question may arise. Is rigorism being removed from the ethics of actions only to be reinstated in the ethics of motives, so that while supererogatory actions are possible, supererogatory motives are not—only the best of motives being ethically acceptable? I was formerly inclined to answer this question in the affirmative, but have come to think that Christian liberty should be seen as including the possibility of supererogatory motives. A love for philosophy that might be manifested in the career of a Thomas Aquinas can be seen as a good motive from a Christian point of view. It is one way of entering into God's love for his creation and for truth. I think a passion for justice and for human well-being that might be manifested in the career of a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, Jr., is an even better motive from a Christian point of view. And given the limitations of any human being's time and emotional energy, these two motivational patterns are probably not fully compatible. But I believe that both patterns are ethically acceptable—indeed, good—from a Christian point of view, although one is better than the other. Given the limitations of human nature, none of us can hope to be a complete expression of God's goodness, and it is good that the divine perfection should be diversely imaged in motivation (as well as in many other respects).[17]

There is much more to be said about the possibility of supererogatory motives than there is room to say in the present essay, in which my central concern is with the kind of ethics of actions that is required by the Christian motivational ideal. Let us therefore return to the issue of the possibility of supererogatory actions. I have argued that the Christian motivational ideal of devotion to God does not imply that the best action available to us is always obligatory. I want now to go further and argue that the Christian motivational ideal actually *requires* some limitation of our obligations in the ethics of actions, to leave breathing room for love. Our love for what God loves would not have free play if there were no possibility of supererogation. For conscientiousness, respect for God's commands is and ought to be a very compelling motive. If it always drove us to just one of our alternatives, then the Christian, insofar as he is conscientious, could never do anything primarily out of love for what God loves. Such love could at most be an additional motive for him to do something that he would have done anyway out of conscientiousness.

That is true, in particular, of love for one's individual neighbor. "*You always have the poor with you, . . . but you will not always have me.*" That can sound arrogant, but there are contexts in which anyone could say it to his friends. If someone loves you he will want to do something sometimes because it would be nice for you or would express his love for you, and not primarily because he thinks it would do the most good on the whole. I am emphatically not endorsing the romantic idea that there is no place for duty in love relationships. Lovers will be particularly solicitous to perform their duties to each other, and will not wish to have no such duties. But they will want also to be able to do things for each other that conscience does not require them to do.

The ideal of love requires a place at least for ethically indifferent actions, and probably for supererogation. The ethics of actions, or at least its obligation department, must be limited in scope in order to leave breathing room for the ethics of motives. A concrete example may be helpful here. If whenever it occurs to me that it would be nice to take home some ice cream to my wife, it is my duty to do so unless some weightier duty is opposed to the impulse, then I must always think either that I must do it or that I must not do it. And that rather spoils it. I can never buy the ice cream simply or mainly out of a desire to please her, because conscience is such a weighty motive.

In arguing thus I do not mean to imply that actions cannot be motivated by love if the agent knows that they are ethically required (and is conscientious). Parents who are conscientious may be moved by love to provide food for their children, even though they know it is their duty to do so. In providing for their family's needs they may, indeed, be much more conscious of their love than of the thought of duty. What I have argued is only that the ideal of love demands that not all cases of loving motivation should be of this sort—that some actions should be controlled by love in a way that excludes the presence of an alternative sufficient motive of conscientiousness. It should also be noted that the case of the conscientious parents whose love makes it unnecessary for them to think about their duty in doing it is believable only insofar as there is a fairly large area in which they assume that they will not violate their duty no matter what (among likely alternatives) they do. If they were so rigoristic as to believe that every detail of their provisions for their children is a matter of obligation—for instance that on every occasion it is either obligatory or wrong to give a child a cookie—then conscientiousness would require attention to duty at every step of the way.

Perhaps it will be objected that I have been overlooking another possible ethical relation between action and motives. If love for another

person prompts me to do a certain action, it may be a sin to refrain from that action, even though refraining would not be a sin if I did not have the impulse. Here the obligation in the ethics of action is an obligation *not to quench love*, and is not an obligation to do something one would not do if one did not love. I grant that this sort of obligation to act on an impulse can arise, but I do not think all permissible loving actions are to be turned into duties this way. The duty not to quench love will in general be an *imperfect* duty. If one loves someone, one *ought often* to express one's love in action. But if one does that, and therefore is not quenching love, it is not obligatory to act on *every* loving impulse, and one's loving actions are therefore not individually obligatory. To recognize an ethical obligation to act on *every* loving impulse, in order not to quench love, would be self-defeating; for the recognition of it would threaten to turn all expression of love into an exercise of conscientiousness.

The performance of duties for a loved one can be deeply satisfying to both parties, but it would surely be an impoverishment of personal relations, a loss of grace, if there were no place for free gifts not dictated by conscience. It even seems good that there should be room for extravagant actions in which calculations of prudence as well as of duty are thrown to the winds, as in breaking an alabaster jar of precious ointment and pouring it over someone you love.[18]

## NOTES

1. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), especially p. 95.

2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.11.1161b4.

3. This point is central to Bernard Williams's argument in his half of *Utilitarianism, for and against*, by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

4. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 34.

5. Ibid., p. 40.

6. Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, abridged edition, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 56.

7. I do not mean to deny that a more theonomous interpretation of the Law than Paul's is possible in Judaism.

8. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 34.

9. See Dieter Nestle, *Eleutheria: Studien zum Wesen der Freiheit bei den Griechen und im Neuen Testament*, Teil I: *Die Griechen* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967).

10. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.11.1161a35–b10.

11. This objection is characteristically Protestant, and I particularly do not want to discuss whether Protestant critics have correctly understood the Catholic position on merit. The term 'supererogation' has its original home in Catholic teaching that certain ascetical practices are "counsels of perfection," which Christians are advised but not generally commanded to follow as a way to a holy life. These ideas have been the subject of a long, and continuing, discussion in Catholic moral theology.

12. See R. M. Adams, "Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984): 392–401; and "The Problem of Total Devotion," in Robert Audi and William Wainwright, eds., *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 169–194.

13. It is interesting that Fletcher's Christian utilitarianism does not get beyond this reaction, but takes sides firmly against the Jesus of the story (Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, p. 97). For a sharply opposed view, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, p. 462.

14. As I have argued in R. M. Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* 81 (1972): 317–332.

15. Codex Vaticanus ("B") and a few other manuscripts.

16. Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. O. Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 145.

17. Here I touch on points that I have developed more fully in "Saints." Linda Zagzebski's comments helped me to see them as points about Christian liberty. Gregory Trianosky's interesting paper, "Supererogation, Wrongdoing, and Vice: On the Autonomy of the Ethics of Virtue," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 26–40, includes discussion of ways in which the ethics of virtue may be thought to be more rigoristic than the ethics of actions.

18. This paper has had a long gestation period, and has been presented, in various forms, to a number of groups and individuals, to whom I am indebted for comments. Special thanks are owed to Marilyn McCord Adams, Malcolm Diamond, Alan Donagan, Thomas E. Hill, Jr., Edmund Leites, Philip L. Quinn, Amelie Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, and Robert Young.