

The Politics of God and the Politics of Man

by Jacques Ellul

Postscript: Meditation on Inutility

In spite of God's respect and love for man, in spite of God's extreme humility in entering into man's projects in order that man may finally enter into his own design, in the long run one cannot but be seized by a profound sense of the inutility and vanity of human action. To what end is all this agitation, to what end these constant wars and states and empires, to what end the great march of the people of Israel, to what end the trivial daily round of the church, when in the long run the goal will inevitably be attained, when it is always ultimately God's will that is done, when the most basic thing of all is already achieved and already attained in Jesus Christ? One can understand the scandalized refusal of modern man who can neither accept the inutility of what he has done nor acquiesce in this overruling of his destiny. One can understand that the man who wants to be and declares himself to be of age is unwilling to acknowledge any tutor, and, when he surveys the giddy progress of his science, cannot admit that it has all been already accomplished by an incomprehensible decree of what he can only regard as another aspect of fatality. In fact, in spite of all that we have been able to learn in these pages, before God we are constantly seized by an extreme feeling of inutility. It begins already on the sixth day, when we come up against the inutility of the function of Adam in the garden of Eden. Here is this man, the lord and master of a creation which has been handed over to him and which is perfect when set under the eye of God. Yahweh takes man and sets him in the garden of Eden in order that he may till it and keep it. But what sense is there in tilling it? Already on the third day God has set up the order whereby plants and trees propagate

themselves. Everything grows in abundance. God himself causes trees of all kinds to grow out of the soil and they are pleasant to the sight and good for food. What can tilling mean in these conditions? The point of tilling is either that things cannot grow without it, or that the various species should be improved, or that plants which produce food should be protected against noxious weeds, or that the yield should be increased. But in this perfect order there is no place for cultivation. And keeping? Against whom or what is man to keep it? What external enemy threatens the perfect work in which everything is good? What protection can man give to a world where God himself is the full protector? Against what disorder is he to keep it when order is the finished work of God? What place is there for tilling and keeping in the perfect fellowship and unity represented by God's work, in this creation in which there is no division, when everything has a part in everything else, when each fragment is not just a fragment united to all the others but also an expression of the total unity of a creation that reflects the perfection of its creator, when the bond between the Lord and the universe is of such perfection that the Lord's rest is the equilibrium of his creation? Tilling and keeping make sense only in a world in which things are divided, the unity is shattered, equilibrium has been disturbed, and the relation between the Lord and his creature has been destroyed. To till it and keep it? It is God's command and yet a useless service.

Then we are confronted by the law or will of God broken down into commandments entailing our works. But works to what end? What are we to make of the long struggle of the Hebrew people, which regards works as necessary to salvation, except that it is all useless? What are we to make of works performed to effect reconciliation with God, except that they are all in vain? The whole frenzied effort of well-intentioned man has been crushed. At a stroke we learn that in Jesus Christ salvation is given to us, that God loved us first before we did anything, that all is grace; grace—gracious gift, free gift. Life and salvation, resurrection and faith itself, glory and virtue, all is grace, all is attained already, all is done already, and even our good works which we strive with great difficulty to perform have been prepared in advance that we should do them. It is all finished. We have nothing to achieve, nothing to win, nothing to provide. On this road it is not that half is done

by God and half by man. The whole road has been made by God, who came to find man in a situation from which he could not extricate himself. But what about works? Not just the deadly works of the law, which are deadly because man thinks he can fashion his own salvation, which is his destiny, by them, but the works of faith, the works without which faith itself is dead, the works which are the expression of the new birth, the fruits of the Spirit—of what use are these works? Why should we do them? Here again we come up against the same inutility, the same vanity, as we contemplate God's omniscience and stand in the perfect presence of his love. And yet works are demanded of us; they are God's command and yet a useless service.

We turn next to prayer, to the relation with the Father which Jesus himself taught, the gift which confuses us since what is given to us is that we may speak with God as a man speaks with his friend. But again the thought arises: Your Father knows what you need. Of what use is it, then, to confide our fears and plans to him, to present our requests and problems? God knows well in advance that we are not aware of all our needs, of all that saddens us, of all that lacerates us. He knows in advance. What good is it, then, to seek his blessing, his help, the gift of his Spirit? What good is it to pray to him for our mutual salvation and to present to his love the living and the dead? Does he not know them each one? For each one did he not on Calvary undergo the shed blood and the bowed head? For each one has he not decided in love from all eternity and brought his benediction in person to all distress and toil? And when we haltingly seek to express ourselves in prayer, we have every reason to be discouraged in advance: "You do not know yourselves what you should ask." You do not know your true needs or real good. Fortunately there is one to help. The Holy Spirit intercedes for you before the Father with sighs that cannot be uttered (Romans 8:26ff.). But if this perfect prayer is rendered by other lips than ours, if it is out of our hands, of what avail is our own awkward formulation of our requests and complaints? Why put our hands together for him who himself prays for us? We are thus struck by the vanity of prayer, by its inadequacy and poverty. Prayer? It is God's command and yet a useless service.

Then there is wisdom, human wisdom, man's intelligent ordering of his life, the serious employment of right reason, the attempt to find the proper way of life, the whole enterprise that takes form in political action and personal morality, in social work and poetry, in economic management and the building of temples, in the constant improvement of justice by changing laws, in philosophy and technology, the manifold wisdom of man which is also inscribed in the wisdom of God and which may be an expression of this wisdom, the first of all God's works that rejoiced before him when he laid the foundations of the world (Proverbs 8:22ff.). And yet—are we not told that God has convicted of folly the wisdom of the world? "For the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men.... Consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards" (1 Corinthians 1:18ff.). Human wisdom, futile pride, a Babel built by those who think they are wiser than God; man has been able to plumb the depths, to find gold there, and to explore the oceans, as Job says, "but where shall wisdom be found?" (Job 28). Human wisdom, an incomparable excuse for all that we are not, under the concealment of all that we do! But should we invent it? Should we reject all its work? Should we lead the world to nothingness, because nothingness is the way of resurrection? Should we already cut the harvest because the venomous fruits of wisdom are indissolubly linked to the adorable fruits of the same reason? It is not yet time, says Jesus, and he restrains the seventh angel; wisdom must pursue its work. Wisdom; it is the command of God and yet a useless service.

We now come to preaching. What language, what word, what image, what eloquence can pass on a little of this flame to others? All that we count most dear and profound and true, we want to communicate, not to make others like ourselves, not to win them or constrain them, but to show them the way of life, the irreplaceable way of love which has been given to us, so that they can have a share in the joy of this wedding. But the language is empty and conveys nothing; the form gives evidence of our own unskillful hands. Nothing becomes true except by the Holy Spirit. What can we say, and why should we say it, if everything depends on this unpredictable act of the Spirit of God who blows where he wills (John 3:8) and lays hold of whom he wills, if inward illumination is directly from God, who calls

Paul when he is a persecutor and Augustine in his rhetorical pursuits and makes all truth known to both of them? If our words to even the dearest of brothers are lifeless and fall to the ground unless the Holy Spirit comes and breathes on them, if our tongue is mute in spite of our illusions, as that of Zechariah was (Luke 1: 19ff.), or if, which is worse, it is unclean, as that of Isaiah was (Isaiah 6:5), and if the angel alone can release it, what is the good of preaching and speaking and witnessing and evangelizing? Does not God do it quite well by himself? And yet—"How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? ... So faith comes from what is heard." (Romans 10: 14-17), and again: "Go... teach all nations" (Matthew 28: 19). Futile preaching, and yet so important that Paul can cry: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16). Preaching! It is God's command and yet it is useless service.

What we have been saying can all be summed up in the judgment which Jesus passes with intolerable clarity: "Say, 'We are unworthy servants.'" But we should isolate two different elements in this saying in Luke 17:10. Jesus says: "When you have done all that is commanded...." Jesus is not evading the problem of law and order. There is a divine law, which is a commandment, and which is addressed to us. Hence we have to fulfil it to the letter. We have to do all that is commanded. The sense or conviction of the utter futility of the work we do must not prevent us from doing it. The judgment of uselessness is no excuse for inaction. It is not before doing or praying or preaching that we are to proclaim their inutility. It is not before their work that Elisha, Jehu, and Hezekiah proclaim the uselessness of their work, which is only a fulfilment of God's action. Pronounced in advance, futility becomes justification of scorn of God and his word and work. It is after doing what is commanded, when everything has been done in the sphere of human decisions and means, when in terms of the relation to God every effort has been made to know the will of God and to obey it, when in the arena of life there has been full acceptance of all responsibilities and interpretations and commitments and conflicts, it is then and only then that the judgment takes on meaning: all this (that we had to do) is useless; all this we cast from us to put it in thy hands, O Lord; all this belongs no more to the human order but to the order of thy kingdom. Thou

mayest use this or that work to build up the kingdom thou art preparing. In thy liberty thou mayest make as barren as the fig-tree any of the works which we have undertaken to thy glory. This is no longer our concern. It is no longer in our hands. What belonged to our sphere we have done. Now, O Lord, we may set it aside, having done all that was commanded. This is how Elisha and Elijah finished their course.

The second point to be noted in the verse is that it is not God or Jesus who passes the verdict of inutility. It is we ourselves who must pronounce it on our work: "We are unprofitable servants." God does not judge us thus. He does not reject either us or our works. Or rather, he does not echo the verdict if we have passed it ourselves. If (as Christ demands) we judge ourselves in this way when we have done all we could do and accepted all our responsibilities, if we are able to view our own works and most enthusiastic enterprises with the distance and detachment and humor that enable us to pronounce them useless, then we may be assured of hearing God say: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21). But if we pass in advance this bitter judgment of uselessness that paralyzes and discourages us, if we are thus completely lacking in love for God, or if on the other hand we magnify our works and regard them as important and successful (Jesus, little Jesus, I have so wonderfully exalted you, but if I had attacked you in your defenselessness your shame would have been as great as your glory. . . .), if we come before God decked out in the glory of these lofty, grandiose, and successful works, then . . . "Woe to you that are rich" (Luke 6:24), for the rich man today is the successful man.

Everything is useless, and we are thus tempted to add: Everything, then, is vanity. We are tempted, for it is a temptation to do only what is useful and to assimilate the judgment of Ecclesiastes on vanity (1:2ff.) to the inutility which we have been briefly sketching. Now this spontaneous reaction raises a question. Why are we so concerned about utility? Why do we regard what is not useful as worthless? In reality, we are obsessed at this point by the views of our age and century and technology. Everything has to serve some purpose. If it does not, it is not worth

doing. And when we talk in this way we are not governed by a desire to serve but by visions of what is great and powerful and effective. We are driven by the utility of the world and the importance of results. What counts is what may be seen, achievement, victory, whether it be over hunger or a political foe or what have you. What matters is that it be useful.

My desire in these meditations on the Second Book of Kings is to call our judgments into question. Yes, prayer is useless, and so too are miracles and theology and the diaconate and works and politics. The healing of Naaman served no purpose, nor did the massacres of Jehu.

The piety of Hezekiah could be no more effective than the impiety of Ahaz. But what then? We must fix our regard on another dimension of these acts, of all these acts that kings and prophets had to perform. It is just because these acts were useless and did not carry with them their own goal and efficacy that they are on the one hand testimonies to grace and on the other an expression of freedom. To be controlled by utility and the pursuit of efficacy is to be subject to the strictest determination of the actual world. To want to attain results is necessarily not to be a witness to the free gift of God. If we are ready to be unworthy or unprofitable servants (although busy and active at the same time), then our works can truly redound to the glory of him who freely loved us first. God loved us because he is love and not to get results. Our works are thus given a point of departure and they are not in pursuit of an objective. If we act, it is because God has loved us, because we have been saved, because God's Spirit dwells in us, because we have received revelation, and not at all in order that we may be saved, or that others may be converted, or that society may become Christian or happy or just or affluent, or that we may overcome hunger or be good politicians. Elisha goes to anoint Hazael because he is ordered to do so and not so that Hazael may do good. In this way the freedom of our acts, released from worry about usefulness or efficacy, can be a parable of the freedom of the love of God; but not in any other way.

It is thus in this bread cast on the waters (Ecclesiastes 11:1), in all these somber and passionate acts we have been reading about together, in all these past decisions, that we have seen outcroppings of freedom.. Just because these acts were useless within the plan of God, man was free to do them. But he had to do them. To do a gratuitous, ineffective, and useless act is the first sign of our freedom and perhaps the last. The men of the Second Book of Kings, each in his own place, played their part for God. But none of them was indispensable. None of them served in a decisive way the great plan of the Father accomplished in the Son, the mysterious purpose the angels wanted to look into (1 Peter 1:12). None of them did the radical deed, and each was free in his own way. "A wonderful freedom," one might say, "if it can have only vain and futile works as its object? If to be successful we must be subject to necessity or fatality, then so be it!" In fact, if nothing in the Second Book of Kings had taken place, if none of the decisions of these men had been made, little would have changed. Israel and Judah would have been led into exile, the remnant would still have been weak, and the plan of God would have been fulfilled as it was in Jesus Christ. Nothing would have been different in the facts, in what we call history. If we do not pray, if we do not do the works of faith, if we do not seek after wisdom, if we do not preach the gospel, nothing in history, nor very probably in the church, would look much different. The world would go its way, and the kingdom of God would finally come by way of judgment. And yet there would be lacking something irreplaceable and incommensurable, something that is measured neither by institutions nor metaphysics nor products nor results, something that modifies everything qualitatively and nothing quantitatively, something that gives the only possible meaning to human life, and yet that cannot belong to it, that cannot be its fruit, that is not its nature. This is freedom: man's freedom within God's freedom; man's freedom as a reflection of God's freedom; man's freedom exclusively received in Christ; man's freedom which is free obedience to God and which finds unique expression in childlike acts, in prayer and witness, as we see these in the Second Book of Kings, within the tragic acts of politics and religion.

