

Anselm – Cur Deus Homo Book 1, Chapters 11 - 15

Chapter 11: What sin is, and what it means to make it right

Anselm: We need to work out how God deals with human sin. To do that clearly, let's first figure out what sin actually is, and what it means to properly make up for it.

Boso: You explain, I'll listen.

Anselm: If a human being or an angel always gave God what they were supposed to, they would never sin.

Boso: I can't argue with that.

Anselm: So sinning is simply failing to give God what you owe him.

Boso: And what exactly do we owe God?

Anselm: Every desire and choice of a rational being should line up with God's will.

Boso: That's completely true.

Anselm: That is the debt humans and angels owe to God. Anyone who pays it doesn't sin; anyone who doesn't, does. This is what justice means — having a will that is properly oriented toward God. It is the one complete thing we owe him as a matter of honour. Only a will like this produces actions that please God, and when such a will can't act outwardly, it still pleases God on its own — because without it, no action counts for anything.

Whoever fails to give God this honour is robbing God of something that belongs to him, and is dishonouring him. That is what sin is. And as long as the person doesn't make it right, they remain in the wrong. But it's not enough just to give back what was taken — given the disrespect involved, they need to give back *more* than they took.

Think of it this way: if someone puts another person's life at risk, it's not enough just to make sure they're safe again — you also owe them something for the distress caused. In the same way, if you dishonour someone, simply honouring them again isn't enough. You have to make it up to them in a way that genuinely compensates for the wrong done.

We should also note that when someone returns something they wrongly took, they should give something extra on top — something they wouldn't have owed at all if they hadn't stolen in the first place.

So anyone who sins owes God back the honour they stole — and that is what we mean by making satisfaction for sin.

Boso: Since we've agreed to follow reason throughout this, I can't object to any of that — though it does unsettle me a little.

Chapter 12: Could God simply forgive sin out of kindness, without requiring anything in return?

Anselm: Let's go back and ask: would it be right for God to just wipe away sin out of pure compassion, without receiving back the honour that was taken from him?

Boso: I don't see why that wouldn't be fine.

Anselm: To forgive sin that way is really just choosing not to punish it. But if sin is neither compensated for nor punished, it simply gets dropped without being dealt with. That's not really forgiveness — it's just letting it go.

Boso: That's fair.

Anselm: It's not right for God to leave anything in his kingdom just hanging unresolved like that.

Boso: I'd be afraid to argue against that.

Anselm: So it follows that it isn't right for God to let sin go unpunished.

Boso: That seems to follow, yes.

Anselm: There's another problem too: if sin goes unpunished, there would be no difference in God's eyes between someone guilty and someone innocent. That doesn't fit with who God is.

Boso: I can't deny it.

Anselm: Consider this as well: everyone understands that justice for human beings operates according to law — God rewards and punishes according to what the law requires.

Boso: That's what we believe.

Anselm: But if sin is neither paid for nor punished, it falls outside the law entirely.

Boso: I can't see it any other way.

Anselm: So wrongdoing, if it's let off through compassion alone, ends up more unchecked than justice itself — which seems deeply wrong. And on top of that, it puts injustice in a position similar to God's, since just as God is above all law, injustice would be too.

Boso: I can't argue against your logic. But when God tells us to forgive those who wrong us, doesn't it seem contradictory for him to require something of us that he himself won't do?

Anselm: There's no contradiction, because God is telling us not to take into our own hands something that belongs to him alone. Vengeance belongs only to the one who is Lord over everything. When the powers of this world rightly carry out punishment, it is actually God doing it through them, since he established those powers for that purpose.

Boso: You've cleared up what I thought was a problem. But here's another one. God is completely free — he's not subject to any law or anyone's judgement. He is also supremely merciful — we can't even conceive of anything more merciful. And what's right is simply whatever he wills. Given all that, it seems strange to say he is unable or unwilling to overlook an offence done to himself, when we regularly ask him to show us grace for offences we've committed against others.

Anselm: What you say about God's freedom and mercy is true. But we need to understand those things in a way that doesn't undermine his dignity. True freedom means freedom to do what is genuinely good and fitting — it's not freedom to do anything at all. And true mercy doesn't mean doing things that are unworthy of God's character.

When we say that whatever God wills is right, we don't mean that something becomes right simply because God happens to will it. If God were to will something wrong — say, to tell a lie — that wouldn't make lying right. It would mean he wasn't God. No will chooses to lie unless truth has already been corrupted within it. So when we say "if God were to will a lie," we're really saying "if God's nature were such that he could lie" — and from that impossible premise, nothing meaningful follows. It's like saying "suppose water were dry and fire were wet" — neither is true, so nothing follows.

The real point is this: if God chooses something, it is right precisely because nothing unfit is involved. If God wills it to rain, it is right for it to rain. If he wills someone to die, it is right for them to die. Therefore, since it would be unfit for God to act unjustly or arbitrarily, it simply isn't in keeping with his freedom, mercy, or will to let a sinner off without punishment when that sinner has made no return to God for what they took.

Boso: You've answered every objection I could think of.

Anselm: Good — but let me spell out more clearly why it's unfit.

Boso: I'm ready to hear it.

Chapter 13: The order of things cannot tolerate a creature stealing the Creator's honour and never giving it back

Anselm: In the whole order of things, there is nothing more intolerable than a creature taking away the honour owed to the Creator and failing to restore it.

Boso: Nothing could be more obvious.

Anselm: And there is no greater injustice than being made to put up with something so terrible.

Boso: Also obvious.

Anselm: So surely you wouldn't say that God ought to simply put up with the greatest possible injustice — that is, a creature not giving back to God what was taken from him?

Boso: No — that should be completely ruled out.

Anselm: Furthermore, if nothing is greater or better than God, then nothing is more just than the supreme justice that upholds God's honour in the ordering of all things — and that justice simply *is* God himself.

Boso: Nothing could be clearer.

Anselm: So God upholds his own honour with perfect justice.

Boso: I have to agree.

Anselm: Does it seem to you that he fully upholds it if he allows himself to be robbed of it, receiving neither satisfaction nor punishing the one who robbed him?

Boso: I wouldn't dare say so.

Anselm: Therefore, either the honour that was taken must be restored, or punishment must follow. Otherwise God would be either unjust to himself or powerless in relation to both parties — and even thinking such a thing is wrong.

Boso: Nothing more reasonable could be said.

Chapter 14: How punishing the wicked restores God's honour

Boso: I want to understand how punishing a sinner actually restores God's honour. If the sinner doesn't make things right but is simply punished instead, has God really got his honour back? Because it seems like God loses it and can't recover it — which contradicts what we've just said.

Anselm: It's impossible for God to truly lose his honour. One way or another, it comes back to him. Either the sinner willingly pays what is owed — by avoiding sin or making proper amends — or God takes it from him by force through suffering and torment, showing that he is Lord over the sinner even when the sinner refuses to acknowledge it.

Notice this too: just as a sinner takes something belonging to God, God in punishing takes something belonging to the sinner. And what belongs to a person isn't just what they currently have — it also includes what they have the potential to have. Human beings were made capable of reaching happiness by living rightly. So if, because of sin, a person is stripped of happiness and everything good, they are repaying out of what was theirs what they stole — even if they do so against their will.

God doesn't use what he takes away for his own benefit the way a thief converts stolen money to their own use. But the very act of taking it away serves his honour — because it demonstrates that the sinner and everything belonging to them is under his authority.

Chapter 15: Does God allow his honour to be violated, even slightly?

Boso: That satisfies me. But there's one more thing. If God is supposed to uphold his own honour, why does he allow it to be violated in the first place? Surely if it can be injured at all, it isn't perfectly and completely preserved.

Anselm: Nothing can actually be added to or taken away from God's honour in itself. The honour that belongs to him is completely beyond injury or change. But within creation, when a creature — especially a rational one capable of understanding — lives in accordance with its proper nature and place, it is said to obey and honour God. When such a being freely chooses what it should, it honours God — not by giving God anything he lacks, but by willingly placing itself under God's will and authority, maintaining its own proper role in the universe and contributing to the universe's beauty and order. When it chooses wrongly, it dishonours God — as far as it is concerned — by refusing to submit itself freely to God. It disturbs the order and beauty of the universe, at least from its own corner of it. But it cannot actually damage or diminish God's power and majesty.

Think of it like this: imagine things within the universe trying to be somewhere outside the universe, or trying to get away from the sky above them. There is nowhere they can go that isn't still under the heavens — they can't escape the sky without at the same time being beneath it. However far they move from one part of it, they only draw closer to another part. In the same way, even when a human being or an evil angel refuses to submit to God's will and design, they cannot actually escape it. If they flee from his commanding will, they fall straight into his punishing will. And wherever they go, they go only by his permission. Even their defiant choices and actions are, under God's infinite wisdom, woven into the order and beauty of the universe.

When we understand that God brings good out of many kinds of evil, we can see that satisfaction freely given for sin, or else the punishment that follows when it isn't, each has its own proper place and its own kind of order within the universe. If God's wisdom did not insist on these things when wickedness tries to upset the right order, there

would be a kind of ugliness at the heart of the very universe God is supposed to be governing — as though he wasn't doing his job. And both of those things — an ugly, disordered universe and a God who fails to govern it properly — are not only unfit but actually impossible. So satisfaction or punishment must follow every sin, without exception.

Boso: You've resolved my objection.

Anselm: So to sum up: no one can truly add to or take away from God's honour as he is in himself. But within the created order, a creature appears to do one or the other depending on whether it aligns its will with God's or opposes it.

Boso: I can't think of anything to say against that.

Anselm: Let me add one more thing.

Boso: Go on — I won't tire of listening.