

The Early Church Fathers on Justification

We are justified by our faith in Christ which is manifested in a life of good works. As James tells us: "faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17). While the meaning of the text is plain some still try to get around it. They contend that salvation is a free gift, and it is. But then they take another step and say that once salvation is achieved there is nothing one can do or not do to lose it. One must merely believe to be saved. They see works as a human effort to please God. But the works spoken of by James and the Early Fathers are accomplished by the grace of God and not on the strength of the individual. Therefore, they do not constitute "Works Salvation." In reality a good work is the evidence that the individual has accepted the grace of God in his life. That is why James says no works equals dead faith. And dead faith cannot save.

Clement of Rome

Let us therefore join with those to whom grace is given by God. Let us clothe ourselves in concord, being humble and self-controlled, keeping ourselves far from all backbiting and slander, being justified by works and not by words. . . . Why was our Father Abraham blessed? Was it not because of his deeds of justice and truth, wrought in faith? . . . So, we, having been called through his will in Christ Jesus, were not justified through ourselves or through our own wisdom or understanding or piety or works which we wrought in holiness of heart, but through faith, whereby the almighty God justified all men. (*Letter to the Corinthians* 30:3, 31:2, 32:3-4 [A.D. 95]).

Theophilus of Antioch

Give studious attention to the prophetic writings, and they will lead you on a clearer path to escape the eternal punishments and to obtain the eternal good things of God. He who gave the mouth for speech and formed the ears for hearing and made eyes for seeing will examine everything and will judge justly, granting recompense to each according to merit. To those who seek immortality by the patient exercise of good works, he will give everlasting life, joy, peace, rest, and all good things, which neither has eye seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man. For the unbelievers and for the contemptuous, and for those who do not submit to the truth but assent to iniquity, when they have been involved in adulteries and fornications and homosexuality and avarice and in lawless idolatries, there will be wrath and indignation, tribulation and anguish, and in the end such men as these will be detained in everlasting fire (*To Autolykas* 1:14 [ca. A.D. 181]).

Clement of Alexandria

When we hear, 'Your faith has saved you,' we do not understand the Lord to say simply that they will be saved who have believed in whatever manner, even if works have not followed. To begin with, it was to the Jews alone that he spoke this phrase, who had lived in accord with the law and blamelessly and who had lacked only faith in the Lord (*Stromata* 6:14 [post A.D. 202]).

Hippolytus

It is said, the Savior has declared, "Not every-one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." And it is necessary that they who perform this (will), not hear it merely, should enter into the kingdom of heaven (*Refutation of All Heresies* 5:2 [A.D. 225]).

Origen

Whoever dies in his sins, even if he profess to believe in Christ, does not truly believe in him; and even if that which exists without works be called faith, such faith is dead in itself, as we read in the epistle bearing the name of James (*Commentaries on John* 19:6 [A.D. 226-232]).

Cyprian

You, then, who are rich and wealthy, buy for yourself from Christ gold purified in fire, for with your filth, as if burned away in the fire; you can be like pure gold, if you are cleansed by almsgiving and by works of justice. Buy yourself a white garment so that, although you had been naked like Adam and were formerly frightful and deformed, you may

be clothed in the white garment of Christ. You who are a matron rich and wealthy, anoint not your eyes with the antimony of the devil, but with the salve of Christ, so that you may at last come to see God, when you have merited before God both by your works and by your manner of living (*Works and Almsgiving* 14 [A.D. 252]).

Aphractes

Great is the gift which he that is good has given to us. While not forcing us, and in spite of our sins he wants us to be justified. While he is in no way aided by our good works, he heals us that we may be pleasing in his sight. When we do not wish to ask of him, he is angry with us. He calls out to all of us constantly; "Ask and receive, and when you seek, you shall find" (*Treatises* 23:48 [A.D. 336-345]).

Gregory of Nyssa

Paul, joining righteousness to faith and weaving them together, constructs of them the breastplates for the infantryman, armoring the soldier properly and safely on both sides. A soldier cannot be considered safely armored when either shield is disjoined from the other. Faith without works of justice is not sufficient for salvation; neither is righteous living secure in itself of salvation, if it is disjoined from faith (*Homilies on Ecclesiastes* 8 [ca. A.D. 335-394]).

John Chrysostom

He that believes in the Son has everlasting life." Is it enough, then, to believe in the Son,' someone will say, 'in order to have everlasting life?' By no means! Listen to Christ declare this himself when he says, 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord! Lord!" shall enter into the kingdom of heaven'; and the blasphemy against the Spirit is alone sufficient to cast him into hell. But why should I speak of a part of our teaching? For if a man believe rightly in the Father and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit, but does not live rightly, his faith will avail him nothing toward salvation (*Homilies on the Gospel of John* 31:1 [circa A.D. 391]).

Jerome

But since in the Law no one is justified before God, it is evident that the just man lives by faith.' It should be noted that he does not say that a man, a person, lives by faith, lest it be thought that he is condemning good works. Rather, he says the 'just' man lives by faith. He implies thereby that whoever would be faithful and would conduct his life according to the faith can in no other way arrive at the faith or live in it except first he be a just man of pure life, coming up to the faith by certain degrees (*Commentaries on Galatians* 2:3:11 [A.D. 386]).

Augustine

But we know that God does not hear sinners: but if any man is a worshiper of God and does his will, that man God will hear. He still speaks as one only anointed. For God does listen to sinners too. If God did not listen to sinners, it would have been all in vain for the publican to cast down his eyes to the ground and strike his breast saying: "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." And that confession merited justification, just as the blind man merited enlightenment (*Homilies on the Gospel of John* 44:13 [A.D. 416]).

Prosper of Aquitaine

Just as good works are to be referred to Him that inspires them, God, so too evil works are to be referred to those who are sinning. For sinners have not been abandoned by God so that they might themselves abandon God; rather, they have abandoned and have been abandoned and have been changed from good to evil by their own will; and consequently, although they may have been reborn, although they may have been justified, they are not, however, predestined by Him who foreknew what kind of persons they would be (*Calumniators in Gaul* 3 [A.D. 431]).