

# The Early Church Fathers on Merit

When the Catholic Church speaks of a believer meriting salvation, she does not mean it in the strict literal sense. For only Christ can merit or earn salvation for us. When applied to humans, the word merit is synonymous to the word reward. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us: "With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man. Between God and us there is an immeasurable inequality, for we have received everything from Him, our Creator" (CCC 2007). The Catechism goes on to say: "The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of His grace" (CCC 2008). So, when we speak of man meriting salvation, we are speaking of man being rewarded for allowing God to work through him. In short, for saying yes to Christ. This was also the view of the early Church.

## Ignatius of Antioch

Be pleasing to him whose soldiers you are, and whose pay you receive. May none of you be found to be a deserter. Let your baptism be your armament, your faith your helmet, your love your spear, your endurance your full suit of armor. Let your works be as your deposited withholdings, so that you may receive the back-pay which has accrued to you (*Letter to Polycarp* 6:2 [A.D. 110]).

## Justin Martyr

We have learned from the prophets and we hold it as true that punishments and chastisements and good rewards are distributed according to the merit of each man's actions. Were this not the case, and were all things to happen according to the decree of fate, there would be nothing at all in our power (*First Apology* 43 [A.D. 151]).

## Tatian the Syrian

[T]he wicked man is justly punished, having become depraved of himself; and the just man is worthy of praise for his honest deeds, since it was in his free choice that he did not transgress the will of God (*Address to the Greeks* 7 [A.D. 170]).

## Athenagoras

And we shall make no mistake in saying, that the [goal] of an intelligent life and rational judgment, is to be occupied uninterruptedly with those objects to which the natural reason is chiefly and primarily adapted, and to delight unceasingly in the contemplation of Him Who Is, and of his decrees, notwithstanding that the majority of men, because they are affected too passionately and too violently by things below, pass through life without attaining this object. For . . . the examination relates to individuals, and the reward or punishment of lives ill or well spent is proportioned to the merit of each (*The Resurrection of the Dead* 25 [A.D. 178]).

## Theophilus of Antioch

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 [Rom. 2:7], he will give everlasting life, joy, peace, rest, and all good things, which neither eye has seen nor ear has heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man [1 Cor. 2:9]. For the unbelievers and the contemptuous and for those who do not submit to the truth but assent to iniquity . . . there will be wrath and indignation [Rom. 2:8]" (*To Autolycus* 1:14 [A.D. 181]).

## Irenaeus

"[Paul], an able wrestler, urges us on in the struggle for immortality, so that we may receive a crown and so that we may regard as a precious crown that which we acquire by our own struggle and which does not grow upon us spontaneously. . . . Those things which come to us spontaneously are not loved as much as those which are obtained by anxious care" (*Against Heresies* 4:37:7 [A.D. 189]).

## Tertullian

Again, we [Christians] affirm that a judgment has been ordained by God according to the merits of every man” (*To the Nation’s* 19 [A.D. 195]).

“A good deed has God for its debtor [cf. Prov. 19:17], just as also an evil one; for a judge is the rewarder in every case [cf. Rom. 13:3–4]” (*Repentance* 2:11 [A.D. 203]).

#### **Hippolytus**

Standing before [Christ’s] judgment, all of them, men, angels, and demons, crying out in one voice, shall say: ‘Just is your judgment,’ and the justice of that cry will be apparent in the recompense made to each. To those who have done well, everlasting enjoyment shall be given; while to lovers of evil shall be given eternal punishment (*Against the Greeks* 3 [A.D. 212]).

#### **Cyprian of Carthage**

The Lord denounces [Christian evildoers], and says, ‘Many shall say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, and in your name have cast out devils, and in your name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, you who work iniquity’ [Matt. 7:21–23]. There is need of righteousness, that one may deserve well of God the Judge; we must obey his precepts and warnings, that our merits may receive their reward (*The Unity of the Catholic Church* 15, 1st ed. [A.D. 251]).

#### **Lactantius**

Let everyone train himself to righteousness, mold himself to self-restraint, prepare himself for the contest, equip himself for virtue . . . [and] in his uprightness acknowledge the true and only God, may cast away pleasures, by the attractions of which the lofty soul is depressed to the earth, may hold fast innocence, may be of service to as many as possible, may gain for himself incorruptible treasures by good works, that he may be able, with God for his judge, to gain for the merits of his virtue either the crown of faith, or the reward of immortality” (*Epitome of the Divine Institutes* 73 [A.D. 317]).

#### **Cyril of Jerusalem**

The root of every good work is the hope of the resurrection, for the expectation of a reward nerves the soul to good work. Every laborer is prepared to endure the toils if he looks forward to the reward of these toils (*Catechetical Lectures* 18:1 [A.D. 350]).

#### **Jerome**

It is our task, according to our different virtues, to prepare for ourselves different rewards. . . . If we were all going to be equal in heaven it would be useless for us to humble ourselves here in order to have a greater place there. . . . Why should virgins persevere? Why should widows toil? Why should married women be content? Let us all sin, and after we repent, we shall be the same as the apostles are!” (*Against Jovinian* 2:32 [A.D. 393]).

#### **Augustine**

What merit, then, does a man have before grace, by which he might receive grace, when our every good merit is produced in us only by grace and when God, crowning our merits, crowns nothing else but his own gifts to us? (Letters 194:5:19 [A.D. 412]).

#### **Prosper of Aquitaine**

Indeed, a man who has been justified, that is, who from impious has been made pious, since he had no antecedent good merit, receives a gift, by which gift he may also acquire merit. Thus, what was begun in him by Christ’s grace can also be augmented by the industry of his free choice, but never in the absence of God’s help, without which no one is able either to progress or to continue in doing good” (*Responses on Behalf of Augustine* 6 [A.D. 431]).