

Eternal Life: A Merited Free Gift?

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BY PARTICIPATING in Jesus' Pasch through faith and works of love, can we merit eternal life? In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus employs the image of a heavenly treasury: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:19–21). How do we lay up heavenly treasures? Without describing all the elements of the Christian life that Jesus puts forward in his Sermon on the Mount, one notes that Jesus attaches to certain actions his promise of heavenly reward. For example, he states, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt 5:11–12). Likewise, those who love only their friends already have their reward, whereas those who love their enemies will receive a heavenly reward (see Mt 5:46). Those who practice piety so as to be seen and praised by others "will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 6:1). Those who give alms, pray to God, and fast in secret without desiring a temporal reward, can be sure that "your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt 6:4, 6, 18).¹

¹ The theological tradition emphasizes the glorious character of the reward. Commenting on Matthew 19:29, where Jesus promises that those who sacrifice earthly goods "for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life," Hilary of Poitiers speaks of "heavenly joy," Theodore of Heraclea of "spiritual joys far exceeding earthly ones," and Cyril of Alexandria of "paradise" and the "Jerusalem above." See *Matthew 14–28*, ed. Manlio Simonetti, in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers

This emphasis on reward, on storing up “treasures in heaven,” is found also in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus warns against “all covetousness” (Lk 12:15) and tells a parable designed to encourage his hearers to seek heavenly treasure. The parable presents a wealthy farmer who loves his temporal possessions more than he loves God, and who therefore is unprepared for eternal life: “‘I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.’ But God said to him: ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, where will they be?’” (Lk 12:19–20). Jesus concludes that people should strive to be “rich toward God” (Lk 12:21) by giving alms: “Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys” (Lk 12:33).

How should we understand this biblical language? N. T. Wright comments that in reaction to the tendency of medieval theologians to see “everything in terms of merit,” the Protestant Reformers placed lack of merit at the heart of their theology.² In Wright’s view, this concentration on merit’s presence or absence distorts the message of Jesus. Wright explains that the “logic of merit” inevitably results in an understanding of “God as a distant bank manager, scrutinizing credit and debit sheets.”³ He considers that Jesus, like Paul, thinks in terms of the “logic of love”—the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—rather than in terms of the “logic of merit.”

Yet, is there perhaps a place for both the logic of merit and the logic of love in theological accounts of how we participate in Christ’s Pasch so as to share in his inheritance? Does Christ’s teaching on building up “treasures in heaven” (Mt 6:20) suggest a harmony between merit and love? Arguing that the answer is yes, I first examine the roots of the theology of merit as set forth in Gary Anderson’s *Sin: A History*. I then explore Thomas Aquinas’s theological account of meriting eternal reward. In light of the connections between love and merit made by Anderson and Aquinas, I propose that the indwelling Holy Spirit configures us to Christ by enabling us to merit eternal life by works of love.

Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 104–5. Cf. Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999). Bauckham and Hart emphasize that Scripture’s eschatological language must be read as symbolizing a reality far greater than can be imagined.

² N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 188.

³ Ibid.

Gary Anderson's Biblical Theology of Sin and Merit

By means of historical reconstruction, Anderson identifies a shift in the image of sin employed by biblical authors. His research suggests that prior to the sixth century B.C. and the rise of the use of Aramaic, biblical authors speak of sin as a weight or a burden. Later biblical authors, however, envision Israel's sin as a debt (in the context of debt slavery). A careful examination of this shift in imagery, Anderson thinks, will assist Christians in moving beyond perennial theological controversies about redemption, grace, and merit.

Anderson pays particular attention to controversies surrounding the theology of satisfaction and the theology of merit. As he observes, "Almost as soon as the idea of sin as a debt appears on the scene, so does its financial counterpart, credit."⁴ Anderson draws especially on Daniel 4:27 [24], "Therefore, O King, may my advice be acceptable to you: Redeem your sins by almsgiving and your iniquities by generosity to the poor; then your serenity may be extended"; Proverbs 11:4, "Financial capital is of no avail on the day of wrath, but *śēdāqāh* saves from death"; Proverbs 19:17, "He who is generous to the downtrodden makes a loan to the Lord; He will repay him his due"; Sirach 29:12, "Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from all affliction"; and Tobit 4:7–11, "Give alms from your possessions to all who live uprightly, and do not let your eye begrudge the gift when you make it. Do not turn your face away from any poor man, and the face of God will not be turned away from you. If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. So you will be laying up a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity. For almsgiving delivers from death and keeps you from entering the darkness; and for all who practice it, almsgiving is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High."

Anderson notes that almsgiving functions here as does credit in an accounting ledger. As Daniel assures King Nebuchadnezzar, credit balances debt; almsgiving pays the debts we owe for our sins. Turning to the New Testament, Anderson explores the notion of a "treasury" (Sir 29:12) or a "good treasure" (Tob 4:9) built up by acts of almsgiving. This "treasury" of generous actions stands as credit against the debts of our

⁴ Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 135. The attempt to remove all "juridical" notions from the theology of salvation assumes that the conceptual framework of "debt" has no place for love. This faulty assumption shapes the approach of Francis Xavier Durrwell, C.Ss.R., *Christ Our Passover: The Indispensable Role of Resurrection in Our Salvation*, trans. John F. Craghan (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2004), 48–51, 55–59, 97–101.

sins. It rescues us from God's wrath on the day of judgment. Anderson points to Luke 12, where Jesus warns against "all covetousness" (Lk 12:15) and tells a parable designed to encourage his hearers to seek "treasures in heaven." In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus employs this image of a heavenly treasury: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:19–21).

Drawing upon Ephrem the Syrian and Augustine, Anderson notes that although God wills to reward our good works, nonetheless the reward far exceeds the works. As Anderson puts it, in the heavenly treasury "[e]very dollar invested in yields growth by a hundredfold. The small amount deposited provides sufficient leverage to open the gates of immeasurable divine generosity (so Augustine: 'Give a little and receive on a grand scale . . . Give the earth and gain heaven')." ⁵ Furthermore, it is God who establishes the "treasury" by his promises, so that our hope for a heavenly reward flows from our faith in God, whose grace "guarantees" the reward. ⁶ The treasury that we build up depends on God's gracious promises to reward our good actions in Christ.

Anderson treats at length the encounter of Jesus and the rich young man. When the rich young man asks Jesus how to gain "eternal life," Jesus replies, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mt 19:21). The rich man goes away sad. In order to avoid being "last" (Mt 19:30) in the life to come, do we need to give away all our possessions, as Jesus requires of the rich young man? ⁷ Anderson notes that "Jesus's injunction to give alms was meant to turn the young man's earthly focus heavenward through the agency of the poor." ⁸ Comparing Jesus' words with similar injunctions in rabbinic Jewish literature, Anderson distinguishes between "heroic almsgiving" and the proportionate almsgiving that is

⁵ Ibid., 159–60.

⁶ See *ibid.*, 157.

⁷ Ben Witherington III seems to suggest that the answer is yes: "In Judaism, almsgiving was one of the three pillar virtues, but it presupposed one had assets from which to share. What Jesus says amounts to a rejection of conventional Jewish piety that said it was all right to be wealthy so long as one was also generous. Jesus is clearly enunciating a new Jewish ethic here, and it is not surprising that the young man is said to have gone away sad (v. 22). The bar had just been raised on what amounted to being a good or godly person, much less being a disciple of Jesus" (Witherington, *Matthew* [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006], 370).

⁸ Anderson, *Sin*, 177.

taught elsewhere in the New Testament. Heroic almsgiving is the vocation of Jesus' inner group of disciples. Anderson points out that Jesus "had in his company a band of followers who had left their families to follow him. The radical demands of the kingdom for this inner circle precluded, at least for a time, any involvement with family."⁹ As Anderson says, later Christians recognized heroic almsgiving as a vocation for "men and women who were . . . leaving family behind in pursuit of the Kingdom of God."¹⁰

In the New Testament, not all followers of Jesus are called to heroic almsgiving. But all are called to proportionate almsgiving in imitation of Christ's sacrificial love. Jesus' parable of the last judgment (Mt 25:41–43) shows how this is so. Jesus portrays himself as sending away, at the last judgment, those who gave him no food when he was hungry, no drink when he was thirsty, no welcome when he was a stranger, no clothing when he was naked, and no care when he was in prison. By contrast, those who perform such acts of self-giving love will "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt 25:34). No one is excused on the grounds that they did not meet Jesus, for we meet Jesus in the poor: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

Even so, how can God give us such an extraordinary eschatological reward for relatively small actions? Even if "[w]e love, because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19), does our love—by which God "abides" in us (1 Jn 4:16) and gives us "confidence for the day of judgment" (1 Jn 4:17)—have any relationship to the glorious reward? Is not the reward that God gives us better conceived as sheer gift, unrelated to our weak and faltering actions in laying "down our lives for the brethren" (1 Jn 3:16)? Can a system of debits and credits really have anything to do with the unfathomably great eschatological reward that God promises his people?

Anderson points out that almsgiving imitates God: "In light of the character of the heavenly treasury, it is hardly fair to say that a religious system of debits and credits stands outside the framework of a gracious and loving God. Indeed, in giving alms to the poor one is imitating those very same qualities that exist within God."¹¹ Our debts are so enormous that it would seem that "no amount of almsgiving could ever make a dent in what was owed."¹² But Jesus Christ does not owe the penalty of death, and his life, as the life of the incarnate Son, has infinite value. As Anderson suggests,

⁹ Ibid., 180.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 187. See also Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

¹² Anderson, *Sin*, 188.

Anselm's insight is that Christ's charity in giving his life for us merits infinite reward. Since Christ, being God, does not need this "credit," he shares it with us: his heavenly treasure pays off our debts, so long as in faith and love we follow his sacrificial path of mercy.¹³

Thomas Aquinas on Merit and Eschatology

It should be clear that Anderson's work challenges the view that the "logic of love" and the "logic of merit" need be in opposition. Nonetheless, significant problems remain. We need more clarity regarding what it might mean to merit eternal life. Does it mean that we actually deserve the eternal reward that God gives us? We also need more clarity regarding the relationship of our meriting to Christ's Cross and to the grace of the Holy Spirit. How can we merit a glorious eternal reward, "treasure in heaven" (Mt 19:21), especially since eternal life far exceeds what is proportionate to human nature?¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas's theology of merit addresses these questions in a way that fills out the portrait provided by Anderson.

The Merited Reward of Jesus of Nazareth

At the center of Aquinas's theology of merit stands Jesus Christ, whose "predestination is the cause of ours" both as regards our adoptive sonship and as regards the grace that enables our meritorious actions.¹⁵ God's eternal plan for our salvation has Jesus' Paschal mystery at its center. By his crucifixion, Jesus merited a fourfold reward: Resurrection, Ascension, sitting at the right hand of the Father, and judiciary power. Because Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross," Paul says, "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, and every

¹³ See *ibid.*, 190–202.

¹⁴ *ST* I–II, q. 114, a. 2. See Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., "Nature and Grace in Thomas Aquinas," in *Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., trans. Robert Williams (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009), 155–88; Reinhard Hütter, "*Desiderium Naturale Visionis Dei—Est autem duplex hominis beatitudo sive felicitas*: Some Observations about Lawrence Feingold's and John Milbank's Recent Interventions in the Debate over the Natural Desire to See God," *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 81–131.

¹⁵ See *ST* III, q. 24, aa. 3–4. On Christ's merit see Joseph P. Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: 'Merit' in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 238–47, which emphasizes that God ordained or predestined Christ to be the Redeemer and therefore "Christ was given grace to such a degree that Christ's acts were meritorious not only for himself, but even meritorious condignly for others" (247).

tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:8–11).¹⁶ Aquinas discusses this passage in light of Romans 4, where Paul explains that Abraham must have been justified by faith because "to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due" (Rom 4:4). In Philippians 2, Aquinas notes, the reward of Jesus' Passion—namely that "God has highly exalted him"—is Jesus' "due." In the order of charity and justice, "he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 14:11).¹⁷

The justice of Jesus' exaltation corresponds to the injustice of Jesus' humiliation. Jesus certainly did not deserve to suffer and die the humiliating death of a criminal, nor did he deserve the mockery that he received on the Cross. As Aquinas puts it, "When any man through his just will has stripped himself of what he ought to have, he deserves that something further be granted to him as the reward of his just will."¹⁸ In his obedient endurance of suffering and death for love of us, Jesus shows himself to be the faithful "servant" of God (Phil 2:7).¹⁹ As a servant, he humbles himself in a way that merits reward from God. Since the grace of the Holy Spirit perfects Jesus not solely as an individual but as Head of the Church, he merits eternal life for all his members.²⁰ But if Jesus has satisfied and merited for the entire human race, why speak of further satisfaction and merit? If all is God's gift, why confuse matters by claiming that "those who

¹⁶ Cited in ST III, q. 49, a. 6, sed contra and corpus. In his *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: A. & C. Black, 1998), Markus Bockmuehl states that although this passage should not be thought of "in the sense of a reward," nonetheless it should be seen as "the moral counterbalance to the acceptance of suffering. Theodicy requires that innocent suffering should be vindicated: only thus can it be meaningful, and only so can God be seen to be just. From the Christian perspective, suffering is never an end in itself. It always stands in a necessary relationship to God's justice" (140–41). This relationship to God's justice is what Aquinas has in view when he speaks of a reward.

¹⁷ Cited in ST III, q. 49, a. 6. See also Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 141, as well as Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action*, 278–84.

¹⁸ ST III, q. 49, a. 6.

¹⁹ See ST III, q. 47, a. 2. See also I–II, q. 114, a. 1, ad 1, where Aquinas takes up Luke 17:9–10; in this passage, Jesus asks rhetorically, "Does he [the master] thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

²⁰ See ST III, q. 8, aa. 1 and 5; III, q. 48, a. 1; III, q. 48, a. 2, ad 1. For discussion see Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Godly Image: Christ and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1990), 89–90, 160–66; William D. Lynn, S.J., *Christ's Redemptive Merit: The Nature of Its Causality according to St. Thomas* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1962), especially 144–65.

are made one with the crucified Christ” by “faith living through charity” merit eternal life?²¹

In his discussion of merit, Aquinas recalls Paul’s suggestion that God’s reward to him will correspond to what he deserves in justice. In 2 Timothy 4:7–8, Paul is near death and tells Timothy, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”²² Exercising just judgment and not merely mercy, the Lord will award to Paul (and to all who have loved the Lord) a “crown of righteousness.” How can Paul make such a bold claim?

Aquinas argues that Paul can make such a claim because of the transformation of the human person in Christ through the indwelling of the Trinity and adoptive filiation. Jesus promises that “if a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn 14:23). In the same place he teaches that “I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:16–17). To the Samaritan woman at the well, he speaks of the Holy Spirit as the “water” who fulfills our spiritual thirst and guides us to eternal life: “whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). As Aquinas puts it, the indwelling “Holy Spirit moving us to life everlasting” enables us to attain eternal life through our actions.²³ Regarding the adoptive filiation of believers, Paul says that the Spirit of Christ bears “witness within our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:16–17). For those whom God has predestined in Christ to be adopted sons of God and sharers in the divine nature, charitable actions merit the inheritance that Christ has received.

²¹ ST III, q. 49, a. 1, ad 5.

²² See ST I–II, q. 114, a. 3, sed contra. See George T. Montague, S.M., *First and Second Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 197–98: “The Greek word [for ‘crown’] is used for a deposit that waits to be retrieved or a treasure that is held in keeping, waiting to be claimed. As Paul has kept the faith, so the reward is kept for him. . . . The notion of reward implies merit on the part of the one rewarded. In this, Paul agrees with the first-century rabbis. But for the apostle it is the merit of a righteousness that has been attained by faith in Christ (Rom 3:22), a faith that in Paul’s case has also been manifested by a total commitment even unto imminent martyrdom.”

²³ ST I–II, q. 114, a. 3.

Merit has its root in “grace and charity” and has its reward in “the enjoyment of God.”²⁴

Once the indwelling Trinity makes us adopted sons of God, our actions possess two principles, namely the grace of the Holy Spirit and the human free will. In light of these two active principles, Aquinas distinguishes between “congruent” and “condign” merit. A reward earned in strict justice is earned condignly, while a reward given despite the conditions of strict justice not being met is earned congruously. Insofar as the charitable action proceeds from the human will, the action earns the reward of eternal life only “congruously,” that is to say, only because God fittingly wills to give this reward to the charitable action. In this sense the charitable action merits the reward congruously, by a certain “equality of proportion,” because the graced human person does what he or she can.²⁵ As regards the human will, no charitable action can merit the reward of eternal life by strict justice. Ontologically speaking, God and humans “are infinitely apart, and all man’s good is from God. Hence there can be no justice of absolute equality between man and God.”²⁶ With respect to human capacities, no charitable action can deserve the reward of beatific communion in the Trinity.

Yet because of the indwelling of the Trinity and our adoptive sonship, a human action can also be viewed with respect to “the dignity of grace” and “the power of the Holy Spirit moving us to life everlasting.”²⁷ The action’s

²⁴ ST I, q. 95, a. 4. Thus “the greater the charity whence our actions proceed, the more perfectly shall we enjoy God” (ibid.). Cf. I–II, q. 114, a. 4: “Everlasting life consists in the enjoyment of God. Now the human mind’s movement to the fruition of the divine good is the proper act of charity, whereby all other virtues are ordained to this end.”

²⁵ ST I–II, q. 114, a. 3. See Wawrykow, *God’s Grace and Human Action*, 198–99.

²⁶ ST I–II, q. 114, a. 1; cf. I–II, q. 114, a. 3: “If it is considered as regards the substance of the work, and inasmuch as it springs from free will, there can be no condignity because of the very great inequality” between humans and God. Aquinas observes that “by all the good we do, we cannot make sufficient return to God, since yet more is his due” (I–II, q. 114, a. 1, obj. 1; cf. III, q. 49, a. 3, ad 2). He interprets Jesus’ remark about “unworthy servants” (Lk 17:10) in this light.

²⁷ ST I–II, q. 114, a. 3. Wawrykow remarks that adoptive filiation “grants to the child new rights. The child now has the right to, or is owed (*debitur*), what belongs to the parent. The adopted child becomes the parent’s heir. Thus, in terms of merit, God’s free act of love by which the person is chosen to eternal life creates for the recipient of God’s love new rights—rights, that is, to inherit the goal to which God has called him. What we have here, then, is a further instance of Thomas’s reflections about the intimate relation which exists between justice and love in God’s dealings with the world” (Wawrykow, *God’s Grace and Human Action*, 195–96, n. 102). As Wawrykow goes on to say, “Thomas’s teaching about merit in the *Summa* is clearly ‘juridical’: He explains merit to be a quality of an act by which one

value depends on the Holy Spirit as its principle and on the dignity of habitual grace. The grace of the Holy Spirit transforms our capacities so that our charitable action intimately relates us to the Trinity. Aquinas states that insofar as our work “proceeds from the grace of the Holy Spirit moving us to life everlasting, it is meritorious of life everlasting condignly.”²⁸ As the Holy Spirit’s work, our work can truly be said to merit in strict justice the reward of eternal life. Paul’s labors to fight “the good fight” render him justly worthy of receiving the “crown of righteousness” at the judgment. As Paul says, “I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what I have entrusted to him” (2 Tim 1:12).²⁹

We can in no way merit the justifying grace that makes us adopted sons. Lest there be any doubt, Aquinas states that “a man can merit nothing from God except by his gift, which the Apostle expresses aptly saying (Rom 11:35): ‘Who hath first given to Him, and recompense shall be made to him?’”³⁰ He grants that “God gives grace to none but to the worthy,” but adds “not that they were previously worthy, but that by his grace he makes them worthy.”³¹ Our works do not replace Christ’s, but

deserves, in justice, a reward from God. Yet Thomas’s ‘juridicism’ is highly nuanced, and he is careful to focus our attention on the context in which justice can govern divine-human relations. Most important, he argues that this justice only holds sway when there exists a special community between God and the human person, and this community is itself created by the gift of God. The ‘communal’ basis of justice is disclosed by Thomas’s description of grace in terms of sonship. By grace, God freely elevates people to God’s own level, treating them as ‘sons’ to whom what belongs to the Father can also belong. As the term ‘sonship’ suggests, the community which lies behind merit is itself Christ-centered. It is through the action of the Son of God that others are enabled to be adopted as God’s children” (ibid., 203–4). Cf. Lynn, *Christ’s Redemptive Merit*, 28.

²⁸ ST I–II, q. 114, a. 3. Joseph Wawrykow comments that “grace elevates people to the Spirit’s own level and orients them to the Spirit’s own end, God. What belongs ‘naturally’ to the Spirit comes into the purview of those possessed and directed by the Spirit” (Wawrykow, *God’s Grace and Human Action*, 194).

²⁹ Cited in ST I–II, q. 114, a. 8, obj. 3. The RSV changes this to “what has been entrusted to me,” but adds a note that gives the literal translation: “what I have entrusted to him.” As Wawrykow says, “Meriting, then, is a perfection. It illustrates the greater dignity and worth of the human being” (Wawrykow, *God’s Grace and Human Action*, 242). The reward of Paul’s good works must be eschatological rather than temporal, because temporal goods have to do with merit only when they are given to help us on our way to eternal union with God: see I–II, q. 114, a. 10; cf. III, q. 69, a. 3. With regard to God’s providence, see the comparison of I–II, q. 114, a. 10 to Aquinas’s *Commentary on Job*, in Wawrykow’s *God’s Grace and Human Action*, 228–32.

³⁰ ST III, q. 24, a. 4, ad 3.

³¹ ST I, q. 114, a. 5, ad 2.

instead have their value insofar as we are incorporated into Christ's "superabundant satisfaction for the sins of the human race."³² Paul depicts his own incorporation into Jesus' Passion: "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24). God ordains this incorporation of believers into the crucified Christ. Describing God's eternal plan, Paul says that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10). In his teaching about merit, Aquinas underscores this eternal ordination: "God ordained human nature to attain the end of eternal life, not by its own strength, but by the help of grace; and in this way its act can be meritorious of eternal life."³³

When we have been justified by the grace of the Holy Spirit, our charitable actions make us worthy of progress in relationship with God. Aquinas cites Proverbs 4:18, "The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day."³⁴ Charitable actions dispose us to receive a more intimate relationship with God, an increased participation in the Holy Spirit and configuration to Christ.³⁵

³² *ST* III, q. 48, a. 2; cf. III, q. 69, a. 2. In explanation of how this superabundant satisfaction takes effect in us, Aquinas states, "The head and members are as one mystic person; and therefore Christ's satisfaction belongs to all the faithful as being his members. Also, in so far as any two men are one in charity, the one can atone for the other" (III, q. 48, a. 2, ad 1).

³³ *ST* I–II, q. 114, a. 2, ad 1. For Aquinas, all merit flows from God's predestination of Jesus as "the cause of our salvation" (III, q. 24, a. 4, ad 3). He observes that "man's merit with God only exists on the presupposition of the divine ordination, so that man obtains from God, as a reward of his operation, what God gave him the power of operation for" (I–II, q. 114, a. 1). See Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary*, trans. Helen Heron (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 50–56; Lynn, *Christ's Redemptive Merit*, 30–34; Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action*, 266–76. Cf. Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, in Saint Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 218–70.

³⁴ Cited in *ST* I–II, q. 114, a. 8. Regarding this article, Wawrykow argues that Aquinas has especially in view "the increase of *habitual* grace and of the habit of charity" (Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action*, 224). Wawrykow goes on to explain that "the use of the theological virtue does not directly effect the growth of the virtue, as is the case with acquired virtue. The act of the theological virtue does not create more of the virtue. As supernatural, it is caused and created only by God. Rather, under the influence of God the possessor of the virtue simply disposes himself for more of the virtue. The actual increase of the virtue, the granting of a more intense possession of it, remains the work of God" (*ibid.*, 225).

³⁵ See *ST* II–II, q. 24, a. 6, ad 1. See Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action*, 226, drawing on Lynn, *Christ's Redemptive Merit*, 54–60.

Even so, if we lose grace by mortal sin, our previous charitable actions do not merit the renewal of justifying grace in us. This renewal can only be God's free gift. Nor can even a lifetime of charitable actions merit the grace of final perseverance. Our final attainment of glory, like the justification of the sinner, is utterly God's free gift.³⁶ Aquinas adds that only Jesus can merit justifying grace for others, since "Christ's soul is moved by God through grace, not only so as to reach the glory of life everlasting, but so as to lead others to it."³⁷ Yet the works and prayers of holy persons on behalf of others can in a "congruous" fashion merit justifying grace for others. It is "in harmony with friendship" that God fulfill his friends' holy desires, in accord with God's ordination, "for the salvation of others."³⁸

Almsgiving and Merit

In an example that could be taken directly from Anderson's book, Aquinas comments upon Jesus' words in Luke 16:9—"make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations"—by describing how those who receive alms can merit in "congruous" fashion for their benefactors. Aquinas states, "The poor who receive alms are said to receive others into everlasting dwellings, either by impetrating their forgiveness in prayer, or by meriting congruously by other good works, or materially speaking, inasmuch as by these good works of mercy, exercised towards the poor, we merit to be received into everlasting dwellings."³⁹ The prayers of beneficiaries rise up to God on behalf of benefactors, and God may have mercy on benefactors through such prayers.

As we have seen, Anderson underscores the pivotal role that almsgiving plays in the "heavenly economy."⁴⁰ When alms are given in charity, it is the grace of God in us that moves us to love the needy. Such acts of charity, as Jesus makes clear, merit the reward that God ordains for those who love him, namely eternal life: "your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt 6:4). Aquinas quotes 1 John 3:17, "If any one has the world's goods and

³⁶ See *ST I-II*, q. 114, aa. 7, 9. Wawrykow observes that "the person makes an act of charity by which he intends that all he does will be referred to God and done for God's sake. As long as mortal sin does not intervene, this one act is enough to direct all subsequent acts to God, and so to merit" (Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action*, 201 n. 110). Cf. Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action*, 220–29.

³⁷ *ST I-II*, q. 114, a. 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.* See Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action*, 216–19.

³⁹ *ST I-II*, q. 114, a. 6, ad 3.

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Sin*, 158, 160.

sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"⁴¹ Among the Old Testament texts that Anderson highlights, Aquinas attends particularly to Daniel 4:27 and Tobit 4:8. The text from Daniel, Aquinas recognizes, describes almsgiving as a way of making satisfaction for sin and thus belongs to the virtue of justice, although as an act of mercy, almsgiving belongs to charity.⁴² Tobit instructs his son, "If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. So you will be laying up a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity" (Tob 4:8–9).⁴³ Under normal circumstances, almsgiving should be abundant but not heroic. This teaching accords with Paul's instruction to the Corinthians, "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want" (2 Cor 8:13–14).⁴⁴

The reward promised by Jesus goes far beyond what human actions could deserve on their own. Paul proclaims to the Corinthians that "you will be enriched in every way for great generosity," and he praises "the surpassing grace of God in you" (2 Cor 9:11, 14). Jesus warns that those who fail to give alms will receive condemnation, while those who give alms to the poor will "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt 25:34).

Conclusion

It is commonplace to encounter criticisms of the medieval "emphasis on human merit" and "ever more blatant clerical packaging of merits to meet the inevitable shortfall."⁴⁵ By contrast, Gary Anderson shows that merit is a profoundly biblical reality. As Anderson makes clear through analysis of the Old Testament, Israel perceives God as mercifully helping to pay the debt for Israel's sins. In the New Testament, Anderson finds that credit (or merit) has a function even after Christ pays the debt for all sins. God enables his adopted children, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to be configured to Jesus through the dignity of free charitable actions.

Since charitable actions arise primarily from the Holy Spirit as their principle, Aquinas describes "life everlasting" as "the reward of the works

⁴¹ *ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 1, sed contra.

⁴² See *ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 1, ad 3.

⁴³ Cited in *ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 10, sed contra.

⁴⁴ Cited in *ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 10, obj. 3.

⁴⁵ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 164.

of justice in relation to the divine motion.”⁴⁶ An earthly reward would not suffice for a graced action; nor does Jesus promise an earthly reward. As he says, “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Mt 5:11–12). Commenting on the Gospel of Mark, Mary Healy highlights Jesus’ promise regarding “the ‘eternal life’ that we will gain in the end—the life the rich man so yearned for (10:17), and that corresponds to the longing of every human heart.”⁴⁷ As Aquinas shows, the action of the Holy Spirit in us enables us to merit this reward even in strict justice, because God rewards his own action in us. Aquinas thereby accounts for the “treasure in heaven” (Mt 19:21) that Jesus urges his followers to seek.

In this light, Paul is not being arrogant when he supposes that because of the works that he has performed, “there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Tim 4:8). Paul recognizes that God has stored up for him a heavenly treasure, but Paul also realizes that he has done so by the grace of the Holy Spirit, “so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor 1:29). Through faith working through charity, those whom God adopts as sons and daughters in the Son become worthy of “the free gift of God,” namely, “eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23). This affirmation of the meritorious character of our works of love, enabled by grace, is necessary for understanding our configuration to Jesus.⁴⁸

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⁴⁶ ST I–II, q. 114, a. 10.

⁴⁷ Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 205, 208.

⁴⁸ I wish to thank Chad Raith for his helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this essay.