

Session 11 Take-Home: The Crown He Crowns

What We Found

The New Testament's reward vocabulary is enormous and mostly red-letter: "your reward is great in heaven" (Mt 5:12); the Father "who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt 6:4); "treasures in heaven" (Mt 6:20); "Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your master" (Mt 25:21); "God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake" (Heb 6:10); "the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him" (Jas 1:12); and Paul at the finish: "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). The crown is family inheritance, not an apostle's exception.

And the grammar that keeps it all grace, welded into one Pauline sentence: "**I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me**" (1 Cor 15:10), with 1 Corinthians 4:7 closing every gap: "What have you that you did not receive?" St. Augustine's permanent formula: when God crowns our merits, he crowns nothing other than his own gifts. The key is **sonship** (Session 6): a father's reward to his child, whose talents, training, and existence all came from him, is love wearing justice's clothes, not an employer's wage. "With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man" (CCC 2007); and yet filial adoption lets God freely ordain that our Spirit-moved works truly count (CCC 2008-2010, in substance).

And where does the Catechism end its merit section? Paragraph 2011, after teaching that the charity of Christ is in us the source of all our merits, quotes from St. Thérèse's Act of Oblation: appearing before God in the evening of this life with **empty hands**, asking him not to count her works: the very prayer we met in Session 2. The Church's merit section ends on empty hands, with Christ's own charity named as every merit's source: hands empty of claims, filled by grace, and then truly crowned.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Augustine of Hippo

Letter 194, to Sixtus (418)

"When God crowns our merits, he crowns nothing other than his own gifts." One sentence, sixteen centuries of use, and the whole dispute dissolves: the crown is real, the merits are real, and every ounce of both was grace first.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Sermons on the Song of Songs (12th century)

In substance: my merit is the mercy of the Lord; I am not poor in merit so long as he is not poor in mercy; and if the mercies of the Lord are many, then many too are my merits. The saint carries his merits not like invoices but like love-letters received.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Thomas Aquinas

Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 114

In substance: no creature holds a merit claim against God by absolute equality, and no one can merit the first grace for himself; but God has freely ordained that, moved by grace and charity, our works truly count toward the eternal life he prepared. Merit is real because God promised, not because we invoiced.

Live It This Week

Work one thing in secret. One deliberate act of love this week that no one but the Father will ever see (Mt 6:4). Feel what it is to bank treasure.

Pray Paul's sentence. Each evening: "I worked today; yet not I, but the grace of God with me." Both halves, every time.

Reread the finish line. 2 Timothy 4:6-8, slowly, and pray to be counted among "all who have loved his appearing": that persevering love is exactly whom Paul included.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"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."

2 Timothy 4:7-8a (RSV2CE)

Before next session: read Psalm 42 and Psalm 43.

Catechism of the Catholic Church: 2006-2011