



“By Grace You Have Been Saved”:

Faith & Works

The Year of St. Paul
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*Do Catholics believe that you can earn your salvation?
Is salvation by faith alone or by faith and works?*

Protestants and Catholics are often sharply divided over the question of how we get to Heaven. The disagreement is about how we are justified, or made right with God. Is our justification by faith alone, or by faith and works? The writings of St. Paul are at the center of this debate, because St. Paul clearly affirms that we are saved by God’s grace, not our own efforts.

The modern debate among Christians began in the sixteenth century with Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation. Even as a Augustinian monk, Luther was plagued with his own insufficiency. He has been trained under the theology of Gabriel Biel, who taught that we can merit the grace of justification through our own efforts. Studying Romans, Luther came to the conclusion that salvation is by God’s grace through faith alone.

The Council of Trent met in the late sixteenth century to clarify the Catholic understanding of justification. This outline will address three underlying aspects of Catholic teaching:

1. No one can earn the forgiveness of sins and the gift of righteousness that come through Jesus Christ
2. Justification is the process by which God, through his grace, forgives our sins and conforms us to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ
3. Our own continued cooperation with God’s grace is necessary for both preserving and increasing our holiness, that conformity with Christ that is necessary for eternal life

No One Can Earn Justification

While many think Catholics teach that you can earn your salvation, both the Council of Trent and the Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly teach otherwise. Our salvation is a gift that cannot be earned through our own works. St. Paul makes this fact very clear in his letters.

Council of Trent, Session Six, Canon 1: “If any one says that man may be justified before God by his own works, whether done through the teaching of human nature, or that of the law, without the grace of God through Jesus Christ; let him be anathema [i.e., let him be condemned].”

Council of Trent, Session Six, Canon 10: “If anyone says, that men are just without the justice of Christ, whereby He merited for us to be justified... let him be anathema.

Catechism of the Catholic Church 2010: “Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. ...

See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 1722,1992.*

Romans 3:21—26: But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, though testified to by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed, through the forbearance of God--to prove his righteousness in the present time, that he might be righteous and justify the one who has faith in Jesus.

Ephesians 2:8—9: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast.

See also *Romans 3:27—28, 4:1—8; Luke 18:10—14, et al.*

Through Justification, God Conforms us to Jesus

While different Protestant denominations have a number of nuanced opinions regarding details concerning justification, they historically have taught a doctrine known as *imputed righteousness*. According to this understanding, God covers the sinfulness of believers with Christ's perfect obedience, so that only Christ's righteousness is seen at our judgment. Catholic teaching has been described as *infused righteousness*. God purifies our hearts through faith and baptism, then freely pours into our hearts a share in Christ's own righteousness and enables us to live by that righteousness in obedience and love. God will judge our own hearts to see how they have been transformed into Christ's image by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Just as the sin of Adam and the works of the flesh that we have received from him make us inwardly sinful, worthy of eternal damnation, the grace of Jesus Christ and the works of the Spirit that we receive through him make us inwardly righteous, worthy of eternal life.

Romans 5:18—19: [J]ust as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all. For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous.

2 Corinthians 4:16 - [A]lthough our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

See also *1 Corinthians 15:47—49; Galatians 5:16—25; Colossians 3:3—10.*

Our Cooperation with God Preserves and Increases our Righteousness

Most Protestants understand many of the preceding Scripture citations to refer exclusively to our sanctification, how we are made holy. While recognizing that the Spirit does work in the heart of believers to make us more holy, it is typically argued that our eternal fate will not be decided by our cooperation with the Spirit. Catholics, on the other hand, see sanctification as an essential part of our justification, recognizing that we will be judged by how we have allowed the Spirit to transform our entire lives, including our works.

For this reason, while the Catholic Church admits that salvation is by faith, it does not teach that salvation is by faith alone (see James 2). We will be judged on the basis of our good works, which are themselves made possible only by God's grace. The more fully we allow ourselves to be conformed in our thoughts, our words, and our works to the image of Jesus Christ through cooperation with the

Holy Spirit, the more fully we have embraced God's gift of salvation. If we refuse to be conformed in our thoughts, our words, and our works to Jesus through cooperation with the Spirit, we can reject that gift of salvation.

CCC 1989 The first work of the grace of the Holy Spirit is *conversion*, effecting justification in accordance with Jesus' proclamation at the beginning of the Gospel: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Moved by grace, man turns toward God and away from sin, thus accepting forgiveness and righteousness from on high. [Quoting Council of Trent] "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man."

Romans 1:5, 16:26 – *St. Paul says that his mission is to* “to bring about the obedience of faith.”

1 Corinthians 13:2 – If I have all faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

2 Corinthians 5:9 – 10 – Therefore, we aspire to please [the Lord], whether we are at home or away. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil.

Romans 2:5 – 8 - By your stubbornness and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God, who will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness.

Philippians 2:12 – 15 - So then, my beloved, obedient as you have always been, not only when I am present but all the more now when I am absent, work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For God is the one who, for his good purpose, works in you both to desire and to work. Do everything without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent...

1 Corinthians 10:25 – 27 – Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.

Philippians 1:9 – 11 – “And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” *In other words, Paul is recognizing that if their love increases, the fruit at righteousness that they possess at judgment will increase.*

1 Corinthians 3:8 – [E]ach will receive wages in proportion to his labor. For we are God's co-workers...

1 Corinthians 3:11 – 14 – “[N]o one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire (itself) will test the quality of each one's work. If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire.”

See also *Galatians 5:6; 6:7—9; 2 Corinthians 5:9—10; Romans 6:16—17, 11:21—22*