

Ready Reference # 2: Are Good Works Necessary for Salvation?

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It is the contention of the Roman Catholic religion that salvation is dependent upon the grace of God. However the grace of God is dependent upon faith and obedience. Tim Staples writing on behalf of Catholic Answers puts it this way.

“...we must understand that we are saved by grace through the instruments of faith and obedience. That obedience includes keeping the Ten Commandments, but the keeping of the commandments is an instrument – a necessary instrument – through which the grace of God flows and keeps us in Christ, the principle reward for us, but we understand it is only through grace that we can do so.”¹ (Emphasis ours)

Roman Catholics know that in order to maintain a “faith plus works” salvation they cannot avoid the overwhelming emphasis the Bible places on the grace of God. Hence they teach that God’s grace must be “brought down to man” in some manner. Their manner is through faithful obedience to their sacramental system. Grace is infused through a number of ways in Rome but primarily through their seven sacraments.

Given their understanding of grace, faith, and works Catholics can boast that they are “saved” by the grace of God. But their religion is all about getting the grace of God. They believe that good works and faith in the Roman Catholic system of sacraments guarantees that the grace of God will flow to them from heaven. It is openly confessed by the Roman Catholic religion that a life filled with good works and attendance at enough grace begetting sacraments should get one to heaven. No one in Rome knows just exactly how many works or sacraments must be on one’s resume to assure them the grace to gain entrance into heaven.

Roman Catholic writers also know that there are plenty of Bible passages which forbid introducing good works into any kind of formula as the necessary cause of salvation. We need to distinguish up front the difference between good works being the necessary cause or reason for salvation and good works being the necessary result or consequence of salvation. All Christians are aware that good works have a place as the fruit of salvation but never the cause of salvation.

Roman Catholics are fond of identifying their good works as wrought by God. Hence they make themselves immune to the challenge that they contribute “their own” good works as the cause of salvation. This is simply Roman Catholic double speak. Roman Catholics must “avail” themselves throughout their lives to the Roman Catholic “methods” of attaining the grace of God

¹ All quotations in this analysis are taken from “Are Good Works Necessary for Salvation”. Catholic Answers. April 30, 2015. Tim Staples author.

so that they can do “grace works” which they say are not their own. But the obedience and subservient compliance to what their religion requires of them to get this grace is their own. Hence one step removed Rome still preaches a merit based salvation.

It is the Christian belief that no kind of work whether alleged as a “grace work”, a “faith work”, a “raw self-generated work”, or any other kind of work is taken into account when God justifies the un-godly. Salvation is by grace (unmerited favor detached from sacraments) through faith alone not because of works. We shall see that grace is not merited or earned by means of a lifetime effort of compliance to Roman Catholic rituals.

The biblical data challenges Rome at every point. How will Rome respond to what appears to be the most obvious Bible passages that overturn Rome’s position?

Ephesians 2:8-9

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast.” NIV

Faced with the simplicity of Paul’s statement on the true grace of salvation which saves apart from works of any kind the Roman Catholic religion has to do something with this passage. Here is what they do.

“Here St. Paul is talking about the initial grace of salvation or justification by which we Christians were raised from death unto life. The Catholic Church teaches in agreement with Scripture that this initial grace of salvation is entirely and absolutely unmerited. My heavens, the Catholic Church baptizes babies! What more could she do to demonstrate this truth! What kind of works could a newborn baby have done to merit anything?”

In an almost surreal twisting of Scripture Rome attributes Paul’s statement to Roman Catholic infant baptism. Rome claims that infant baptism washes away original sin, regenerates, begins the process of justification, and puts the infant into the New Covenant in Christ. In the light of this utter fantasy Rome can claim that God saves apart from works. For what works can a baby do?

However the Bible does not teach infant baptism of any kind much less Roman Catholic baptismal salvation. Besides this the Catholic apologist omits any mention that this passage tells us that we are saved “through faith.” If a baby cannot do any work to merit salvation then what about believing? Would Rome say a baby believes unto salvation? Rome does not go this far. But then what about “through faith”? Rome elsewhere answers that it is the faith of the believing parent or the faith of the Church that suffices in the baptism of infants. The Bible does not teach this Romish sleight of hand either but we need to stay on point.

The question before us is simple. Is the apostle Paul teaching Roman Catholic infant baptism in Ephesians 2? We answer no. There is no hope for this kind of bizarre treatment of the text. When the apostle tells the Ephesians that they have been saved by grace through faith and not of works so that they cannot boast, who does he have in mind? Here is who he has in mind.

Ephesians 2:1-3

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (NIV).

There is no mention of infants in this entire section of Scripture. There is no mention of baptism in this entire section of Scripture. In our wildest imagination not one of the characteristics of those who have been saved by grace through faith could possibly be attributed to an infant! This is Rome’s best shot at doing away with the true glorious grace of God. Rome fails miserably and only compounds the error of her strange and unreal world of Scripture twisting to avoid the obvious.

Rom 3:27-28

“Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (NIV).

Roman Catholic apologists would have us believe that we must understand the context of Romans 3:27-28 to rid ourselves of the notion that we are justified by faith alone. They set the context for us by insisting on two things.

1. Paul has already made it clear in Romans that good works are necessary for eternal life and so there must be a harmony between what Paul says in Romans 2 and Romans 3.
2. The thrust of the epistle to Rome is to combat the heresy of the “Judaizers” who insisted that the Law of Moses must be added to faith and obedience to the New Covenant for salvation.

Listen to Rome:

“One of the problems in Rome St. Paul was dealing with was a very prominent heresy known as the “Judaizer” heresy. Those attached to this sect taught belief in Christ and

obedience to the New Covenant was not enough to be saved. One had to keep the Law of Moses, especially circumcision, in order to merit heaven.”

Rome is wrong on three contentions. First Judaizers were not the issue of the epistle to Rome. Paul does express interest in the salvation of his kinsmen according to the flesh but his focus is upon their rejection of the gospel not their additions to it. Second Judaizers were not attached to Rome’s concept of a works based meritorious salvation through Rome’s idea of New Covenant obedience. Third Paul does not teach works are a necessary cause of salvation in Romans 2.

What then is Paul teaching in Romans 2:6-7 that encourages Rome’s works based salvation and at the same time forces Rome to alleviate the clear teaching against their works scheme of salvation found in Romans 3:28?

Rom 2:1-11

“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will give to each person according to what he has done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism” (NIV).

Of the above passage Rome says: “St. Paul had already made very clear in Romans 2:6-7 that good works are necessary for eternal life, at least in one sense.” The sense that Rome protects and Christians reject is the sense that God saves on the basis or on account of good works plus faith. But is this Paul’s thrust in Romans 2? We answer no.

The warnings in Romans 2 are primarily expressed toward those within the nation of Israel (and expanded to include all men) who are under the delusion that their hypocritical judgments would not bring down the wrath and anger of God upon themselves. In laboring the point Paul contrasts two groups of people. There are those who pass judgement on others while committing the same sins. They are at heart stubborn, unrepentant, and storing up wrath for themselves. They are self-seeking, follow evil, and reject the truth. This is the bent of their life. They are spiritually dead and self-deceived. The second group is those who persist in doing the good and seek glory and honor and immortality.

In keeping with the contrast between the two groups the apostle Paul sums up that it is not those who merely hear the law who are saved but those who do the law.

In contrast to Rome Paul does not identify doing the law, doing the good, or pursuing righteousness as the cause of salvation. Both the evil doers and the doers of good do so from a heart's condition. This same theme persists throughout the entire New Testament. Good works are the fruit of true faith. Evil and unrighteousness are the fruit of the un-regenerate heart. This theme is so common throughout the entire corpus of Scripture that it hardly needs a reminder. However there is the persistent error of Rome and other cults that re-frame Paul's insistence upon good works as the fruit of true salvation into the anti-Pauline doctrine of works being the cause or reason for salvation. It seems perfectly clear by the apostle's summation at the end of Romans 2 that the ones who exhibit hypocritical judgements while unrepentant of their own sins are not born of God. Those who are inclined toward doing the Word of God are doing so from a regenerate heart.

Rom 2:28-29

“A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God” (NIV).

Roman Catholic theology continues in the myth that the New Testament is primarily concerned with only purging the Law of Moses as the ground of salvation. This is done to make room for Rome's new covenant works which they claim to be absolutely necessary for salvation. Rome categorizes all works that the New Testament eliminates as a part of the ground of justification as Law of Moses works to clear the way for their own works. As we shall see in our next passage Rome is a master of this sleight of hand.

Rom 4:1-6

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (NASU).

Rome needs to convince us that the word “work” or “works” used here by the apostle Paul refer to the Law of Moses and hence cannot justify. Listen to Rome.

“At this point our Protestant friends may point out that Romans 4:5 does not specify “works of law”. It simply says, “to him who does not work, but believes...” How do we respond? First, it is true that St. Paul does not say works of law in Romans 4:5. But the context makes it very clear that St. Paul was referring to circumcision in particular and the same “works of law” he was referring to in Romans 3:28.”

Does the context make this very clear? Is Paul only excluding the Law of Moses for justification? We answer no.

If anything the context is clear that Paul uses Abraham as his primary illustration of a man who was not justified by any kind of works. We notice that Abraham was justified before the Law of Moses was given to the nation of Israel. Rome would have us believe that only the Law of Moses is meant by works in Romans 4. This is hard to conceive of since the Law of Moses had yet been given. To restrict works that are jettisoned as the ground of justification as only Law of Moses works is beyond biblical believability.

Abraham’s faith is reckoned unto him for righteousness. Nowhere in all of Scripture is Abraham’s works held forth as one half or any percentage of the ground of justification or meriting what is due him by God. It is quite the opposite. Abraham did not work for his justification. Abraham was not awarded justification for his spirit works or good works done in faith. He was justified by faith. His justification is displayed by Paul as the prototype of all Christians who would be justified in the same manner. All who by faith believe what God has given them in Christ are justified apart from works and the Law of Moses. There is no such thing as a personal works resume that qualifies one for heaven. The righteousness of Christ is the only resume that will gain salvation!

This brings us to the epitome of Roman Catholic exegesis and interpretation. Roman Catholic defenders are 100% certain that James teaches one and all that justification is gained by faith plus works. So powerful is James 2 in the eyes of the Roman Catholic that there is little room for doubt or argument. Listen to Rome.

“In the final analysis, I believe the text that is about as plain as any text could be concerning works and justification is James 2:24- that is, it is about as plain as can be in telling us both that “faith alone” is insufficient for our justification, and that “works” are indeed necessary. Are we justified by faith? Certainly! By faith alone? No way! It’s both faith and works, according to Scripture.”

There appears to be much tension between the concept of Justification through faith alone and the corresponding role of works in Justification

JAM 2:21 “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?”

JAM 2:24 “You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”

JAM 2:25 “And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?”

TENSION

ROM 4:2 “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God.”

ROM 3:28 “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.”

GAL 2:16 “nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.”

Roman Catholic Solution: The apostle Paul does not mean to say that ALL WORKS are excluded as part of the grounds of justification. Paul is only concerned that the works of the Mosaic Law are excluded. Hence Paul and James agree that justification is based upon good works done in faith!

Christian Counter: Paul eliminates ALL WORKS because of Titus 3:5 and the fact that Paul’s illustration of a man justified apart from WORKS is Abraham who lived before the Law of Moses was given! HENCE ABRAHAM WAS JUSTIFIED APART FROM ALL WORKS.

TIT 3:5 “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.”

What is James Saying?

Neither Paul nor James teaches us that we are justified by a faith that is alone. Neither Paul nor James teaches us that we are justified by works that are alone. Neither Paul nor James teaches us that we are justified 50% by works and 50 % by faith. They both teach that we are justified by faith that is perfected or completed or demonstrated by works. However, Paul and James both use the word justification to combat different heresies. Paul uses justification to describe the **declaration** of God whereby a sinner is acquitted from all punishment due sin for the sake of Christ alone. James uses the same word to **declare** the sincerity of the faith of a person.

We begin to harmonize Paul and James by noticing that Paul never envisions a dead faith or a spurious faith in his faith vs. works campaign for justification. However James envisions a dead faith in contrast to a real faith that is demonstrated by works in his fight against a vapid faith.

On the one hand we are justified by faith alone, apart from works of law, or personal righteousness, or merit. But on the other we are justified by works working with our faith to complete our faith. Paul assumes that Abraham's faith was real. James proves it.

Re-Cap of James' entire thrust!

When the apostle Paul triumphantly declares that God justifies the ungodly by faith apart from works he has in mind a genuine faith. However the antithesis of what Paul is promoting is a works based righteousness. Paul is not combatting a "useless faith". He is battling a works based justification. James is not contesting against a works based righteousness. James is disputing against a vapid, lifeless and vacuous faith that cannot save. James argues faith without works is dead being all alone and by itself!

JAM 2:14 "What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?"

JAM 2:17 "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself."

JAM 2:20 "But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?"

JAM 2:26 "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."

What is at stake for James is the erroneous idea that one can have faith without any good works. For James this is impossible unless it is the faith of demons. Real faith is demonstrated by real works. This is why all Christians believe that they are saved by faith alone but not by faith that is alone.

Paul says that Abraham was justified by faith alone without the works of the Law and we believe that the ground and reason for that wonderful gift of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ given as a gift to bankrupt sinners. But, the proof that such a faith, that trusts the promises of God in Christ, is demonstrated by good works. Paul envisions one faith. It is a real faith that really believes the promises of God and gives birth to good works. James conceives of two faiths. One faith is empty being by itself and does not justify the sinner. The other faith is real and is completed by works. In the case of Abraham, his justification was justified! Or to put it simply, faith was justified as true faith.

JAM 2:19 “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.”

JAM 2:21 “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? JAM 2:22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; JAM 2:23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God.”

24 “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”

If we try to take each verse of James 2:21-26 as un-related to surrounding verses we end up in a hopeless contradiction. For instance if we take James 2:21 at face value without context we get this:

JAM 2:21 “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?”

Without an understanding of James thrust we would have to conclude that Abraham was justified by works. Neither Rome nor Christianity teaches that Abraham was justified by works! It is the next verse that clarifies the statement of James 2:21. Faith was working with works and as a result of works faith was completed in Abraham. This is the exact intersection that James argues exists between faith and works. Works complete faith. They do not do what only faith can do. When James says that a man is not justified by faith alone he means by an empty, blank, and meaningless faith. As the body gives no demonstration of life without the spirit so faith gives no indication or signal of life without works.

Rome separates works as an entity that is 50% of what it takes to be justified. Christians see works as 100% of what it means to have true faith!

