

Salvation and Works: Part III

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In order to understand the Catholic teaching on salvation, we must understand how the Church reconciles the teachings of Paul with the rest of the New Testament. To get to the heart of the matter, we will compare selected passages that at first blush seem to stand in contradiction. We will then present how Protestants and Catholics harmonize the texts.

Identifying The Problem

There are many verses we could quote to present the tension between the role of faith and works in scripture. The following passages are sufficient to introduce our topic. To begin with, Paul states the following at the end of a discourse in Romans 3,

“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith, **APART from the works of the Law.**¹”

And in Ephesians Paul writes,

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, **NOT the result of works** so that no one may boast.²”

In these passages, Paul articulates that no one can work their way into heaven as faith through grace saves us. On the other end of the spectrum is a passage in James. It states,

“You see that a man is **justified by WORKS** and **NOT** by faith alone.³”

James has just gone through a litany of works done by several Old Testament characters, stressing that their works saved them⁴ as those works made their faith complete.

These passages give us a pretty clear understanding why we have a Protestant-Catholic debate. And just to reassure ourselves that these passages are talking to the same subject, namely how are we justified, it is important to note the Greek word for justification found in Romans and James is the same word; dikaioo.

In the following sections the Protestant and Catholic positions are contrasted. In presenting the Protestant view we will adopt the Calvinist position, as it is the strongest (in my opinion). That position is summed up as salvation is by faith-alone, but faith is never alone. It should also be noted this essay is only focused on the role of works in our justification. It does not touch on the initial graces required to draw us to faith, regeneration (re-birth) or the Eucharist. The role of baptism is only lightly addressed.

¹ Romans 3:28 This essay will use quotes from the Protestant New American Standard Bible (NASB)

² Ephesians 2:8,9 NASB

³ James 2:24 NASB

⁴ James 2:25 “Was not Rahab the harlot also **justified (dikaioo) by works** when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?”

The Protestant Definition

A Protestant definition for salvation is the following:

Faith [born of grace, producing works] = Justification + Works [of the Spirit via grace]

The key here is only faith is found on the left side of the equation. Protestants put a firewall around faith and insist that it alone is the **grounds** of our justification. [The bracketed words help to distinguish between dead faith and living faith on the one hand, and works of the flesh and works of the Spirit on the other.]

The teachings of Paul fit seamlessly into the above equation. We see faith, a gift of grace presented as the sole source of our justification, and there are no grounds for boasting. The challenge for Protestants is the passage from James. After all James says works, not faith alone, justifies us. How do Protestants reconcile James to Paul⁵?

To the Protestant James is insisting saving faith must be a living faith as true faith **always results in works**. Catholics concur. But for the Protestant James sounds as if he's saying too much, overshooting the mark. To rein James in, they need to temper the text.

The text says: "You see that a man **is justified by WORKS** and **not** by faith alone."

What Protestants say the text *means*: "You see that a man **is [shown to be] justified** [by] works and not by faith [that is] alone."

In other words, works are necessary because they **demonstrate** a justifying faith exists. They serve as a proof of justification, not a cause. The problem with this approach is this: James specifically tells us the necessity of works is to get faith into a perfected state, a justifying state, **not merely to demonstrate** justifying faith (which they also do). Works is an ingredient of justification, not merely a fruit.

"You see that faith was working with his works, and **AS A RESULT OF THE WORKS, faith was perfected**⁶"

This is why Paul can say,

"God chose you from the beginning to be saved, **THROUGH sanctification** [i.e. works] by the Spirit and **belief** [i.e. faith] in the truth⁷."

To summarize, Protestants believe works **demonstrate** justifying faith. Catholics believe **works justify us by creating a perfect faith**. Perfect faith can then save us.

⁵ To solve this problem Luther's German Bible removed James from the canon (calling it the Epistle of Straw) and inserted "only" in Romans 3:28 as, "man is justified by faith alone". He later recanted.

⁶ James 2:22 - By "perfected" James means the faith is now is a condition where we can be justified

⁷ 2 Thessalonians 2:13

The Catholic Definition

A Catholic definition for salvation is the following:

Faith [born of grace] + Works [of the Spirit via grace] = Justification

Whenever scripture say we are saved by faith it **always means a perfected faith**. It is implied. James tells us the ingredient that perfects faith is works. In this sense sanctified works of the Spirit **and** faith justify us, not faith alone. Therefore the Church counts sanctification in our justification. But Paul denies works justify! What did he mean?

Jews, known as the Circumcision Group⁸, had infiltrated the Church, teaching the Mosaic ceremonial Law was necessary for salvation; Christians had to become Jews first. It was this creed, salvation by practicing the Mosaic Rites of the Law, which Paul rejected.

“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the **circumcised** by faith and the **uncircumcised** through faith is one. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, **we establish the Law.**”

Paul at once rejects and upholds the Law, distinguishing the Rites from the moral Law.

“I, Paul, say to you that if you receive **circumcision**, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been **severed from Christ**, you who are seeking to be justified by Law; you have fallen from grace...for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything but faith **WORKING** through love⁹.”

Would Paul warn us that obeying the Greatest Commandment (loving God with all our hearts) would sever us from our Savior? No. But Paul **demand**s an end to the Greatest Rite of the Law, claiming that circumcision done as a Rite will sever us from Christ. Seeking justification by Rites of the Law **ends** salvation, not obeying the law of Christ.

But it is impossible for anyone to perfectly obey the moral Law. No one can do it. So Christ did it for us and then nailed the Mosaic Law¹⁰ to the cross. It is the Passion of Christ alone (not the Mosaic Law) that merits access to heaven for mankind. God gives us access to those merits through baptism, the sacrament of faith. Christ's merits are then poured into us, justifying us through faith **and** love of God (both **equally** a grace of the Holy Spirit), with love being the greater virtue¹¹. Obedience to the divine will is granted to us. We therefore say salvation is by Christ alone, by grace alone but not faith alone.

⁸ He identifies his opponents by this name in Galatians 2:12

⁹ Galatians 5:2,3,4 and 5:6 NASB

¹⁰ Christ taught us the New Law in the Sermon as the perfected moral Law with the grace of the Holy Spirit

¹¹ Paul says so in 1 Corinthians 13:2,13

Righteousness And Robes

We have already seen that there are two kinds of faith and two kinds of works. Unless we are clear to which we mean, a Catholic-Protestant dialogue quickly becomes mired in the pit. But there are other distinctions we must identify. Closely identified with works is a type of righteousness. Paul says, “**NONE** is righteous, **NOT EVEN ONE**”¹². Protestants are quick to point this out when Catholics speak of their righteous works. But Matthew describes Joseph as “a righteous man”¹³. A contradiction? No. Joseph’s righteousness was a **work of God** while Paul states no one is righteous **apart from God**.

Somewhat related, Protestants speak (correctly) of how we are robed with the righteousness of Christ and that our own works are filthy rags. Isaiah speaks of both.

“I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels”¹⁴.

“For all of us have become like one who is unclean, **and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment**; And all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away”¹⁵.

But the rags are works of the Flesh, not works of the Spirit. And the righteous robes of Christ include our sanctified works. The apostle John tells us so in Revelation.

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. **It was given her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the RIGHTEOUS ACTS OF THE SAINTS**”¹⁶.

Note that the linen was given to her (grace). Also notice the robes are described as righteous acts of the saints. Paul is correct in that “none is righteous, not even one!” But he’s referring to the works of the flesh. **The works of the Spirit are never filthy rags**.

Tradition

Some Protestants concede that the Catholic Church has been consistent in her teachings on salvation. The Reformed theologian Alister McGrath says, “Augustine understands the verb *justificare* to mean ‘to make righteous’, an understanding of the term which he appears to have held throughout his working life...Man’s righteousness, effected in justification is regarded by Augustine as inherent rather than imputed. The righteousness

¹² Romans 3:10

¹³ Matthew 1:19. There are many examples of individuals described as being just or righteous.

¹⁴ Isaiah 61:10 NASB

¹⁵ Isaiah 64:6 NASB

¹⁶ Revelation 19:7,8 NASB

which man thus receives, although originating from God is nevertheless located within man, and can be said to be his, part of his being and intrinsic to his person¹⁷.”

This is an acknowledgement that Augustine was a Catholic¹⁸, viewing justification to include sanctification, something **infused**¹⁹; God declares (reckons) *what he has in fact done*²⁰. Protestants see justification as **imputed**; we're legally righteous *but in fact not*²¹.

The Church rejected salvation by works when Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 451. Pelagianism is the belief that man can seek God, obtaining salvation unaided by the Holy Spirit. Semi-Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Orange in 529. Semi-Pelagianism is the belief a combination of man's will, unaided by the Holy Spirit but **coupled** with God's grace allows men to come to salvation. The Church is often accused of holding such views when in fact she has sought to crush them.

The Catechism

Paragraph 1991: Justification is at the same time **the acceptance of God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ**. Righteousness (or "justice") here means the rectitude of divine love. With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts, and obedience to the divine will is granted us.

Paragraph 2019: Justification includes the remission of sins, sanctification and the renewal of the inner man.

Paragraph 2020: Justification **has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ**. It is granted us through Baptism. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, **who justifies us**. It has for its goal the glory of God and of Christ, and the gift of eternal life. It is the most excellent work of God's mercy.

Summary

The Church has harmonized Paul with the rest of the New Testament writers, careful to weigh each inspired text. Christ, Paul and James compliment rather than contradict. Christ calls us have **faith in him**, keep the Commandments, eat his flesh and blood and be baptized to obtain eternal life. Paul demands faith, not the performance of Rites of the Law to obtain salvation saying, “if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you” while he upholds the moral Law. James *explicitly* denied faith alone justifies us. The Church has always been Augustinian on salvation, denying Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. As the pillar of truth²² she is faithful to Christ and **all the scriptures**.

¹⁷ McGrath is quoted by R.C. Sproul in the book Faith Alone, page 99

¹⁸ Augustine believed in baptismal regeneration, the sacrifice of the Mass, the Real Presence, the papacy, authoritative Tradition, the Catholic canon, 7 sacraments, purgatory, mortal sins **and infused justification!**

¹⁹ Baptism is the instrumental cause of our justification, as God pours grace into our hearts producing faith and works which justify us. We are instantly just when baptized. But our justification is an ongoing work.

²⁰ Romans 5:18,19 As Adam was declared and **made unrighteous**, so we are declared **and made righteous**

²¹ Luther referred to Christians as snow covered dung. Christ's righteousness is the snow; we are the dung.

²² 1 Timothy 3:15