

Justification

by Sebastian R. Fama

Justification refers to the method by which we are made right with God. Since only those who are justified can enter heaven, it is important that we get this right. Many Protestants claim that we are justified by faith alone. They say that all one must do is to publicly proclaim their trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Many of them also have the mistaken notion that Catholics believe in works salvation. Works salvation is a system by which a person earns a place in heaven by his own efforts. Both views are false.

Initial justification is by neither faith nor good works. Initial justification is a totally free gift (1 Peter 3:21). But it is also true that justification is a process. As the apostle Paul tells us: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13). So, part of the process of justification is allowing **God to work** through us. And those are the works (God's) that are necessary for Salvation. Jesus Himself made this very clear. He said: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, **but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.**" Once again, the works spoken of here are works **performed by God through us**. As the Apostle Paul said: "It is no longer I who live, but **Christ who lives in me**" (Galatians 2:20).

In Romans 1:17, Paul tells us that: "**The just shall live by faith.**" The Catholic Church is in full agreement with this statement. However, she does not agree with the way some would define faith. The Church speaks of faith in the biblical sense. While Paul says, "the just shall live by faith," he also says: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but **faith working through love**" (Galatians 5:6). He further states: "If I have a faith that can move mountains, but **have not love, I am nothing...** And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. **But the greatest of these is love**" (1 Corinthians 13:2, 13). And why is the greatest of these love? Because without love there is no saving faith.

So then, how is love manifested? Well, in Romans 12:9-13 Paul says: "**Let love be genuine**, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. **Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.**"

In Romans 1:5 Paul speaks about the obedience of faith. He said: "Through him **we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith**, for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles." For Paul, to have faith meant to act. But didn't Paul say: "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1)? Yes, he did and as Jesus points out, that is only true if we remain in Him (John 15:4). Paul expands on this in Romans 8:13 where he says: "**For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.**" He also says: "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, **but the doers of the law who will be justified**" (Romans 2:13).

When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" Paul said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31). Some take this to mean intellectual assent, but the Biblical concept of believing means to act in accordance with. Notice how Jesus answers the rich young man who asked, "Good Teacher, **what must I do to inherit eternal life?**" He said: "**You know the commandments...sell what you have and give to the poor**" (Mark 10:17-22). In Matthew 25:32-46, Jesus characterizes the saved as those who feed and clothe the poor and visit those in prison. He also characterizes the damned as those who refrain from such activities.

In Revelation 20:12 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 we are told that we will be judged by our deeds. Was the Apostle John in error when he wrote: "**And by this we may be sure that we know Him, if we keep His Commandments? He who says 'I know him' but disobeys His Commandments is a liar**, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps His word, in him truly love for God is perfected. **By this we may be sure that we are in Him**" (1 John 2:3-5). Finally, we are told in 1 John 3:23: "And **this is His commandment**, that we should **believe** in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and **love one another**, just as He has commanded us."

In Matthew 25:40, Jesus said: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Reject your neighbor, and you reject Jesus! Does this mean that your good works will earn you

salvation? No, not at all. As we saw in Romans 8:13, all that we do, we do by the grace of God. Indeed, we cannot even say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). That is why Paul can say: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). So, throughout the process of Justification, we see God's grace at work. And no man can take credit for that.

For the Christian there is no excuse for serious deliberate sin. "Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation **will also provide the way of escape** that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 12:13). Also: "For this is the love of God, that we keep His Commandments. And **His commandments are not burdensome**" (1 John 5:3). They are not burdensome because, once again, He enables us to obey them with His grace. As we are told in Hebrews 4:15-16: "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses... Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, **that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**" This grace was the reason why Paul could say, "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Certainly, avoiding serious sin is included in all things.

Obedying the commandments is a prerequisite for receiving the Spirit. In John 14:15-16 Jesus says: "If you love me, you will keep my Commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Councilor, to be with you forever." Certainly, the commandments spoken of here are not only the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament but the new commandment given by Jesus: "that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). And as we saw earlier, love implies action.

So, a failure to do good works is not a failure to earn one's salvation, but a rejection of grace which is ultimately a denial of the power of the Holy Spirit, and that is the "unforgivable sin" (Mark 3:28). It is unforgivable because it is a rejection of Christ. Good works are not something in addition to faith, but evidence that faith exists.

Clement, the fourth Bishop of Rome, writing around the year 95, wrote about the connection between grace and works and the need for our cooperation with grace. He wrote:

Let us therefore join with those to whom grace is given by God. Let us clothe ourselves in concord, being humble and self-controlled, keeping ourselves far from all backbiting and slander, **being justified by works and not by words...** Why was our father Abraham blessed? **Was it not because of his deeds of justice and truth, wrought in faith?** ... So, we, having been called through His will in Christ Jesus, were **not justified through ourselves** or through our own wisdom or understanding or piety or works which we wrought in holiness of heart, **but through faith, whereby the almighty God justified all men** (1 Clement 30:3, 31:2, 32:3-4).

As for the sacraments, they are occasions of grace and not rituals that must be performed to earn salvation. The grace received enables us to accept our salvation and to live the Christian life. This is reflected in Jesus' statement concerning the Eucharist in John 6:56. He said: "**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.**" It is only by the grace of God that we accept Christ in the first place and it is only by the grace of God that we remain in Him. This is what the Church calls Sanctifying Grace. Besides Sanctifying Grace, every sacrament produces Sacramental Grace. Sacramental grace is a special grace that helps in the fulfillment of the duties related to a particular sacrament. For example, in the sacrament of Matrimony, the Sacramental Grace received can enable the couple to be the husband and wife that God would have them be. All the sacraments were instituted by Christ and can be found in Scripture. For example: Baptism is found in John 3:5, Confirmation in Acts 8:14-17, Reconciliation / Confession in John 20:21-23, the Eucharist in Matthew 26:26-28, & John 6:53-55, Matrimony in Matthew 19:5-6, Holy Orders in Titus 1:5; and the Sacrament of the Sick in James 5:14-15.

When all is said and done, Catholics and Protestants claim to believe the same thing. We agree that Jesus did the work of salvation. We agree that He offers it to us free of charge. And we agree that each of us must say yes to Jesus in order to be saved. But only the Catholic says yes in the manner prescribed by Scripture.