

It “Works” for Me: The Church’s Teaching on Justification

ISSUE: How does the Catholic understanding of justification differ from the Protestant understanding? Do Catholics believe in salvation by grace alone? Is the Catholic understanding biblical?

RESPONSE: When Catholics and Protestants use the words “righteousness,” “justification” and “sanctification,” they have different, though similar, definitions for these words. These differences lead to a lot of unnecessary and divisive confusion between the two groups. However, if we learn the different ways Protestants and Catholics use these words, we can better understand our differences and points of agreement, providing a basis, with God’s grace, for our ultimate reconciliation.¹

The Catholic Church teaches, and most Protestants² also believe, that people can be saved only by the grace of God, i.e., “*free and undeserved help*” from God,³ which is mediated through Christ, the God-man (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 606-18). We can never “earn” salvation by our own good works; nothing we do is “repaid” by God in a strict tit-for-tat sense (Rom. 11:35, *Catechism* no. 2007). So on this crucial issue—justification (and ultimately salvation) by God’s grace through Christ (Rom. 3:24)—Catholics and most Protestants agree. The Church differs with Protestants, however, regarding the *means* of righteousness, justification, and ultimately salvation.⁴ Protestants believe that people are “justified through faith alone,” while Catholics believe that people are “justified through faith and works.” The Catholic view of justification, properly understood, is not only very convincing and satisfying, it is also biblical and true (cf. *Catechism* nos. 1987-2029 for more information on grace, justification and merit).

DISCUSSION: To understand justification, we must first understand “righteousness.” Catholics and Protestants use the word “righteousness” differently. Protestants usually use “righteousness” to mean either legal righteousness, which they identify with the term “justification,” or behavioral righteousness, the acquisition of which they call “sanctification.” “Legal righteousness” is **extrinsic**, i.e, foreign or external to the individual, and acquired solely by God’s decree. “Behavioral righteousness” is a growing disposition or inclination to doing good, which occurs only after justification.⁵ Catholics almost always use the word “righteousness” with a third and very different definition: They almost always mean “ontological righteousness.” Ontological righteousness is **intrinsic** (inherent to or part of the individual),⁶ a transformation and growth brought about by God. Catholics use the words “justification” and “sanctification” interchangeably, but for two different phenomena: *initial* justification/sanctification (inner or intrinsic transformation) and *progressive* justification/sanctification (ongoing spiritual growth).⁷ The use of different definitions in Protestant and Catholic theological camps is what confuses so many people. The following illustration will make the difference clear.

Justification Illustrated: Protestant and Catholic Views

In the dominant Protestant view, “justification” is like a court procedure. A guilty man stands before a judge who decides to decree him “innocent” on the basis of another man’s innocence. That is, we as sinners stand before God the Father who declares us innocent because of Jesus’ sinlessness and His saving actions. So Protestant justification is like covering a dirty man with a clean robe, declaring him to be clean when he is really not. Martin Luther frankly acknowledged this position, describing a justified man as a snow-covered pile of dung, clean on the outside but not on the inside. The robe is not a part of the dirty man, nor is the snow part of the dunghill; they only *hide* the filth while remaining exterior and separate. The sinner himself *isn’t* clean or just, but he *appears* (or is called) clean and just.

The Catholic view of initial justification is more like bathing or healing, such as a hospitable man washing a dirty man or a physician medicating a sick man to make him healthy. In other words, God doesn’t simply call a man clean and justified or make him look clean and just, He actually *makes* him clean with no dirt or sickness remaining. The Protestant claim is that God makes us appear just with no interior transformation, but the Catholic teaching is that God actually transforms us into just people.

Catholics do not deny that God “declares” people clean and innocent, as if by legal decree. They believe that He goes *further*, however, and actually *makes* people clean and innocent. God is not a liar (Num. 23:19); He would not call a man clean and just without making him clean and just, for “nothing unclean shall enter [heaven]” (Rev. 21:27). God’s Word is efficacious; i.e., He brings about, in reality, what He decrees. Creation itself is a powerful example of this truth. God said, “Let there be light,” and light was created (Gen. 1:3). If God declares that we are clean of sin, we become truly clean: “So shall My word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Is. 55:11).

Having illustrated both the Catholic and Protestant perspectives on justification, we turn now to a closer examination of which perspective the Bible really teaches. Does the Bible depict justification as *merely* a “covering” of legal righteousness, or does the Bible portray justification as *both* a covering *and* an interior transformation and cleansing? The Bible conveys that when God forgives our sin He does not simply “cover” our guilt, as Protestants assert, but actually *removes* it, as the Church teaches:

Have mercy on me, O God, . . . blot out my transgressions [legal terms⁸]. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin [intrinsic terms]! Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow [intrinsic terms]. . . . Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities [legal terms]. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me [intrinsic terms] (Ps. 51:1-2, 7, 9-10).

Psalms 51 clearly uses both legal and intrinsic terms, which supports the Catholic rather than the Protestant view. There are places where the Bible speaks of “covering” sin or “imputing” righteousness (both legal terms), but they must be read in the larger context that includes sins being washed away, taken away, removed, purified, sent away and remitted (all intrinsic terms). Furthermore, the Bible supports the Catholic belief that God transforms the inner man when He justifies him: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

“Initial justification” happens at the beginning of the Christian life and is communicated to people by God through the Sacrament of Baptism (*Catechism*, nos. 1262-1284). At this time, God completely cleanses people of sin, grants them sanctifying grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and gives them new life by incorporation into Christ and adoption into the family of God, the Church. **This initial justification cannot be earned or merited by any action prior to it, not by faith or any other work, because it is the free gift of God:** “[W]e are therefore said to be justified gratuitously, because none of those things which precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification” (Council of Trent *Decree on Justification*, chapter 8).

Provided that he remains in God’s grace,⁹ nothing will hinder the justified man from gaining heaven:¹⁰

For in those who are born again [initially justified] God hates nothing, because there is no condemnation to those who are truly buried together with Christ by baptism unto death, who walk not according to the flesh, but, putting off the old man and putting on the new one who is created according to God, are made innocent, immaculate, pure, guiltless and beloved of God, heirs indeed of God, joint heirs with Christ; so that there is nothing whatever to hinder their entrance into heaven (Council of Trent, *Decree on Original Sin*, section 5).¹¹

Progressive Justification

If “initial justification” makes us clean and pure and even fit for heaven (ultimate salvation), what’s the point of “progressive justification”? Protestants think of righteousness in one dimension, its quality, because they limit righteousness to “legal” or “behavioral”¹² meanings (see above). Catholics think of righteousness in two dimensions, quality and quantity, because they almost always mean intrinsic righteousness. Another illustration will help.

The quality of our initial justification is perfect. Think of a glass of 100% pure water with no additives or contamination. Initial justification makes us as clean, i.e., without sin, as Jesus is. But the quantity of our righteousness is finite, while Jesus’ righteousness is infinite. In other words, there’s a big difference between a glass of pure water and an ocean or spring of pure water. Progressive justification doesn’t make us any cleaner, but it gives us a greater capacity for righteousness and virtue. It’s like trading a four-ounce glass of pure water for a 12-ounce glass of pure water. We may never approach Jesus’ infinite quantity of righteousness, of course, but we can possess more righ-

teousness than we currently have.¹³

We acquire more righteousness by doing good works *within* God's grace and *with the help of* God's grace (Phil. 2:12-13, 1 Cor. 3:9). *This* is how human works contribute to justification (Jas. 2:14-26). Good works are worthless for salvation without God's grace, but *within* God's grace they are precisely what God intends for us (Eph. 2:10). They are a way of showing faithful gratitude to God,¹⁴ and they are made possible by God Himself (Jn. 15:5). If we do not express our faith through our loving works, our faith is dead (Jas. 2:26, 1 Cor. 13:2) and we have not persevered in grace.

There are certain actions or good works, like participation in the sacraments and living virtuously, which God has promised to reward when those within His grace perform them. God does not "have to" reward these actions because He is never actually indebted to us (Rom. 11:35, *Catechism*, no. 2007); but, because of His loving generosity, He has decided to reward us for doing these good works anyway. (This is what Catholics mean when they talk about "merit"—*Catechism*, no. 2008.) Furthermore, God gives us the grace that we need to actually perform good works, which is why St. Augustine said that God is, in effect, crowning or rewarding His own actions (see the *Catechism*, specifically the quote immediately preceding article no. 2006). God rewards good works by giving us a greater capacity for intrinsic righteousness. All just people, i.e., people who are within God's grace, ultimately go to heaven and all enjoy it to the full extent of their capacity; but some have a greater capacity because they progressed further in "progressive justification."

Neither initial nor progressive justification gives us any right to brag to others or be proud before God. Even our truly active participation in progressive justification is enabled and rewarded by a gift of God's generosity, His grace, because He does not ever owe us anything (1 Cor. 4:7; Rom. 11:35). Our response should be humble gratitude, faithful obedience and open thanksgiving, rejoicing in the salvation that is from God.

To fully appreciate and understand this FAITH FACT, InFormation Services recommends carefully reading the FAITH FACT with all the Scripture and Catechism references.

¹ The work of James Akin, a convert from Protestantism, contributed significantly to this FAITH FACT. Readers may access Akins' article "Righteousness and Merit" at www.cin.org/users/james/files on the world wide web.

² Regarding justification, this FAITH FACT examines the general theological heritage of mainline Protestants, e.g., Lutherans, Calvinists, etc., and does not presume to cover their various nuances on this issue.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1996.

⁴ Catholics identify "salvation" with the glorification of heaven so that, unlike Protestants, they do not generally say "I've been saved [past tense]." If someone asks, "Have you been saved?" explain that the answer "I hope to be saved" really means "I hope, in Jesus Christ my Savior, to go to heaven, but I am not there yet." For more information on this matter, see CUF FAITH FACTS: "Persevering to the End: The Biblical Reality of Mortal Sin" and "Sola Scriptura?: Not According to the Bible."

⁵ Because it is *not relevant to justification itself*, this is the last time we will directly address "behavioral" or "dispositional" righteousness. This growing disposition to doing good works, which is gained through cooperation with God's grace, is what Protestants also call "sanctification." According to the traditional Protestant position on sanctification, a person is able to do good works more easily over time but, oddly enough, there is no accompanying internal change; i.e., the person's soul remains unclean or "depraved," meaning the person never possesses, let alone grows in, intrinsic righteousness. The logical and biblical untenability of this position will be developed in this FAITH FACT's treatment of "initial justification" and "progressive justification."

⁶ The term "intrinsic" is *crucial* to understanding the Catholic position on justification, a important point that will be developed in this FAITH FACT.

⁷ People are often tempted to equate initial justification with the Protestant meaning of justification, and also progressive justification with the Protestant meaning of sanctification; but, this is a mistake. Protestants and Catholics use the terms differently. These terms are further clarified in footnote four and the rest of this FAITH FACT.

⁸ This request can be understood legally, as God blotting out “bad marks” in the book of works (Rev. 20:12), or intrinsically, as God removing guilt from the soul. Here we grant the legal understanding the benefit of the doubt, but that does not undermine the Catholic position. Because both legal and intrinsic terms are already used in the larger passage, the “legal only” Protestant case is untenable.

⁹ For more information on the subject of perseverance in grace, see **CUF FAITH FACT: “Persevering to the End: The Biblical Reality of Mortal Sin.”**

¹⁰ Remember: The ultimate destination of all souls in purgatory is heaven; purgatory is not a hindrance, but a help.

¹¹ Bible verses quoted *within* this quote include Rom. 6:4, 8:1; Eph. 4:22, 24; Col. 3:9-10; and Rom. 8:17.

¹² See footnote four to review the Protestant view on “behavioral” righteousness/sanctification.

¹³ See Ludwig Ott’s *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books, 1960, p. 262.

¹⁴ Paul calls this faithful gratitude, the purpose for the Letter to the Romans, the “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26) or “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Faith must be an active faithfulness.

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OTHER RECOMMENDED READING:

Not By Faith Alone by Bob Sungenis (Queenship Publications: 1-800-647-9882).

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