

Good Works

The Lord recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel. ~ Ruth 2:12

THE ROLE OF GOOD WORKS in our salvation has been a contentious issue for several hundred years within Christianity. At the time of Martin Luther and John Calvin in the 16th century, Protestants believed that the Catholic Church taught what has been labeled “works righteousness,” that is, the concept that a person could earn his or her way into Heaven by good works. This continues to be one of the most common charges against the Catholic Church by Protestant Christians, who espouse instead a concept of salvation often called *sola fide* (Latin for “faith alone”). What is the truth of the matter?

Justification is Not the Result of Our Own Efforts

There are numerous passages in the New Testament, especially in St. Paul’s letters, that suggest that works are not salvific. One of the shorter passages reads: “*But if it [God’s choice of his people] is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace*” (Rom 11:6). A slightly longer one reads: “*Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin’*” (Rom 4:4-8, quoting Ps 32:1-2). These passages suggest that God’s favor and forgiveness of our sins — our justification — has nothing to do with our own efforts, but it is the result of God’s



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grace. And this is a correct understanding of these passages. For if God did not initiate the process of conversion, then none of us would choose to love him.

We Cannot “Earn” God’s Favor

However, there is something very subtle, and very momentous, going on here. St. Paul condemns the attitude of the servant or wage-earner, who expects wages not as a gift but as a right. This attitude is incompatible with our relationship with God. First and foremost, we must have faith in God, and trust him with our lives. Good works are not a way to “earn” God’s favor. “With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man. Between

God and us there is an immeasurable inequality, for we have received everything from him, our Creator” (CCC 2007). St. Paul was especially trying to undo the attitude of his fellow Jews (and of certain Jews who had become Christians), who had built up a theology of complete adherence to the hundreds of tenets of the Jewish moral and ceremonial law as a path to righteousness — a works-based system for salvation. St. Paul rightly points out that this is impossible, since no one can perfectly adhere to the law: “*For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction;*

“Obedience to Jesus’ commands — good works — is essential to our salvation.”

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are

justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Rom 3:20-28). The grace bestowed through our redemption by Jesus is the means by which we are justified — that is, brought into God's favor. This justification begins at our Baptism, when we begin

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falling short of our salvation, since we cannot be sinless, either. We can't “work our way” to Heaven; no human works can replace the necessity of God's initial gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet Good Works Are an Essential Part of the Christian Life

If good works cannot “earn” us Heaven, how do they fit into the Christian life? Is faith alone enough? Is a one-time acceptance of Jesus as our Lord and Savior the conclusion of the matter?

This is where the rest of St. Paul's theology must be taken into account. Our good works do indeed count, “[f]or he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, ... but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good” (Rom 2:6-10). Even though our good works do not save us, we are required to do them as part of our Christian life: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:8-10). They are the witness, the manifestation, of the truth of our faith. They are so necessary that it isn't an issue of “faith alone,” because faith that fails to express itself in good works is not truly faith at all, as St. James explains in his letter: “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But some one will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder.... a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead” (Jas 2:14-19, 24, 26). “[W]hen it is deprived of hope and love, faith does not fully unite the believer to Christ and does not make him a living member of his Body” (CCC 1815).



The Widow's Mite, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885

walking “in newness of life” (see Rom 6:3-4; see also Col 2:12).

Yet St. Paul is *not* arguing against good works, and he is *not* arguing against someone who claims that simply obeying Jesus' command to love one another is enough for salvation (that we can “work our way to Heaven”). He is, rather, arguing against the attitude of the servant or the wage-earner, who believes that a full day's pay for a full day's work is rightfully due not only from his or her master or employer, but also from God himself. It is always possible for the master to find fault with the servant — no person is the “perfect servant” — and St. Paul tells us that this attitude condemns us to

Jesus explains the relationship between faith and works using a practical metaphor: “A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits” (Mt 7:18-20). His extended description of the Last Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew tells us how he views good works: we are to care for others as though we were caring for Jesus himself — that is, we are to care for others as we care for members of our own family (see Mt 25:31-46). Thus obedience to Jesus’ commands — good works — is essential to our salvation. Any good thing done by a believer, however, is not on his or her own initiative but through the power of God’s grace.

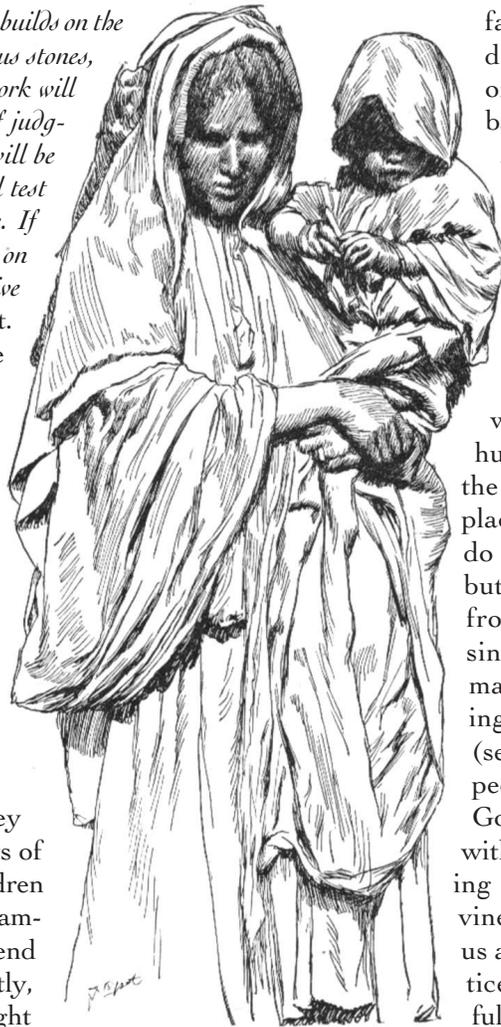
We are Rewarded as God’s Children, Not as His Servants

St. Paul even goes so far as to use the word “reward”: “Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each man’s work will become manifest; for the Day [of judgment] will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward” (1 Cor 3:12-14). Is St. Paul inconsistent? What is he speaking of, if not a reward to a servant or a wage-earner?

Once we understand that God does not treat us as his servants, but as his beloved children, everything becomes clear. We all know that, as five-year-olds, we cannot “earn” our place in the family. We are there because our parents brought us into the family in love, and could no more think of sending us away than they could think of cutting off parts of themselves. In this sense, children have a *right* to be part of the family. And this right doesn’t depend on doing all the chores perfectly, or on doing them at all. The right is a consequence of birth into the family.

But eventually our status as children in a natural family is affected by our behavior. Parents expect their children to do what they tell them to do, to help around the house, to do their homework, to treat their parents with respect and their siblings with kindness, and to grow in virtue and character. This is all “part of the deal” in being a member of a family. None of it will earn, or lose, the child his or her place in the family. It is the parents’ love that invests a child’s good behavior with value. Yet it is certainly possible for a child, especially as they approach adulthood, to behave so badly that they cut themselves off from the family. It is equally possible that, by fulfilling the responsibilities and expectations of childhood, the ties of love between parents and children are continually strengthened. These children can rightly view themselves as the heirs of their parents.

As Christians, we are born into God’s family by Baptism through the redemptive merit of Jesus’ sacrifice of himself (see Gal 4:4-5). Once baptized, “we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:16-17). We do nothing to “earn” our new life in God; it is purely God’s grace that brings us into his family. Yet our Heavenly Father expects us to obey his commandments to love and worship him and to love our fellow human beings. We thereby grow in the Christian life. We can’t earn our place in God’s family — nothing we do is of sufficient value to do that — but we can certainly cut ourselves off from communion with God by our sins. And if we follow God’s commandments, especially those of loving each other as God has loved us (see Jn 13:34; Jn 15:12), we can expect that we will have our home with God forever in Heaven, as co-heirs with Jesus. “Filial adoption, in making us partakers by grace in the divine nature, can bestow *true merit* on us as a result of God’s gratuitous justice. This is our right by grace, the full right of love, making us ‘co-heirs’ with Christ and worthy of obtaining ‘the promised inheritance of eternal



Woman and child of Jericho, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

life.¹ The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness”² (CCC 2009; italics in original).

As children of our flesh-and-blood parents, no faith is required to know them. We can see them, speak to them, be hugged by them. This is not true of God, whom we can see only through the eyes of faith. That is why faith is the first hurdle and, because God and not we initiate the relationship with him, even our faith is not our own doing, but the gift of our Heavenly Father.

Our Merit Comes Through Christ’s Salvific Action

By Jesus’ redemptive suffering and death on the cross, all our good actions take on the merit he earned for us. “*The charity of Christ is the source in us of all our merits* before God. Grace, by uniting us to Christ in active love, ensures the supernatural quality of our acts and consequently their merit before God and before men” (CCC 2011; italics in original). For this reason, we can see that our own merit is itself due to God, “for [our] good actions proceed in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit” (CCC 2008).

We are Rewarded on the Basis of Our Good Works, Not Our Faith Alone

But our part is crucial. God’s grace bestows on us the free gift of grace; it is nothing of our doing. However, God doesn’t force himself on us, but, through the grace of faith, frees us enough from our sinful nature that we might truly be able to choose for, and not against, him. Through our free will — itself a gift of God — we cooperate with his initiative. “The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that *God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace*. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man’s free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the



faithful” (CCC 2008; italics in original).

In this manner, Heaven is truly a reward — not from God our master or God our employer, but from God our loving Father who rewards his children for their response to his love. “Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life” (CCC 2010; italics in original). By Christ’s saving action, we can receive the grace we need to live a life of Christian virtue, especially charity, and we can “rightly hope for *the grace of final perseverance and the recompense* of God [our] Father for the good works accomplished with his grace in communion with Jesus”³ (CCC 2016; italics in original). St. Paul encourages us in these words: “*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain*” (1 Cor 15:58).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus tells us: “*I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve*” (Rv 2:23). “Deserve” not as a servant or as an employee deserves, but as a beloved child who, even in failure, seeks in repentance ever more to please his heavenly Father, who wants nothing more than that his child live with him forever in the loving embrace of Heaven.

(CCC 1815, 2007-2011, 2016)

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¹ Council of Trent (1547) from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 1546 (1965)

² Council of Trent (1547) from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 1548 (1965)

³ Council of Trent (1547) from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 1576 (1965)