

Can I get into Heaven by Faith Alone?

OBJECTOR: The other day I was reading the book of Galatians, and it struck me how much emphasis Paul places on faith as the means of salvation. Then I asked myself how Catholics can believe in justification by works. If the Catholic Church really believes the Bible, as it claims, how can it continue to teach that we have to earn our salvation? The Bible seems pretty clear that justification is by faith alone.

CATHOLIC: There are several aspects to this question. The most important is to realize that the Catholic Church does not teach that we earn our salvation by our own efforts, although it does teach that we have to work on our salvation. The same apostle who wrote Galatians also wrote Philippians, wherein Paul says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

-The Church teaches that we can do nothing to merit the grace that comes to us in baptism, which is the normal beginning of the Christian life. In fact, the Council of Trent condemned anyone who taught that we can save ourselves or who taught even that God helps us do what we could do for ourselves. The Church teaches that we can be saved only by God’s grace.

-St. Paul speaks about Christians fulfilling the law by following the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14). He then explains that we must show the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:16–26) and bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:1ff) as a way of fulfilling the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

-All Paul’s teaching comes down to this: Our own works can never justify us, but works that grow out of faith in Christ are part of our justification. That’s why Paul says in Philippians 2:12 you must “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” And that squares with James’s teaching that works that grow from faith justify.

-I encourage you to pray and think about the Catholic understanding of justification. In sum, the Church teaches that salvation is a process of becoming holier and holier through time. All of this is a work of grace that God performs in our hearts through faith. Works done in faith are the natural completion of believing in Christ. As we trust and do God’s work, he instills within us more grace so that we may become holier and so be ready to meet him at the end of our life.

For the full dialogue between the Catholic and objector visit

<https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/arent-we-saved-by-faith-alone>

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